RIM O' THE RANGE

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THE RIM O' THE RANGE

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Rim o' the Range

A Western Story

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Rim o' the Range

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RIM O' THE RANGE

CHAPTER I

A DEBT PAID

DOWN palm-bordered Center Street of Mesquite Wells, Arizona, clattered the most helter-skelter flivver that could be imagined. Whatever had been the original color of its enamel, it now was coated with dust—as nondescript in hue as any Mojave lizard and as eccentric of pace.

A loose fender beat a metallic processional, louder than the *put-put* of its mufflerless state. One tire was flat as a tortilla, but the occupants were impeded by no concern over its rim. The right fore wheel wabbled like a *jefe politico* approaching some legal decision in a gringo case; looked about as dependable as if attached to an India-rubber axle. Something creaked and whined from within, possibly the springs, although the motor travesty bumped as if they were missing from the weird flivver's make-up.

From the grateful shade of an umbrella palm, three onlookers witnessed the wild approach—a young and

lovely woman, flanked on either side, as she well deserved to be, by an obviously admiring man. From their garb, as well as their presence abroad during the sacred siesta hour, they were members of that alien class known in the wide West as "touries."

"Hail, all hail to Lizzie Ford! There's another triumph for Detroit. On she comes, despite all known laws of gravity, mechanics, and the third dimension," remarked facetiously the taller, plainer, more sandy-haired of the men.

The other member of the escort, shorter, handsomer, darker, laughed and at the same time cynically shrugged the shoulders of his immaculate Norfolk jacket. "You should see some of the contraptions that feed on distance over in Sonora. Better, you should ride in them."

The lady alone made no comment. The mind of Zena Barnett was not of a mechanical turn, therefore unable fully to appreciate the motor miracle. But she had an eye keen as it was beautiful for human interest—already she was studying the personnel of those seemingly risking life and limb in the rickety vehicle.

The wheel was held in a clawlike grasp by a girl—a mere child to judge by the black curls flung from under her low-crushed, straw Mexican sombrero.

Beside her sat a plainsman in shirt sleeves, who didn't look exactly in the patriarchal class, although his overlong hair and beard were white as though sifted with the snows of some northern clime.

The man's skin, or as much of it as was not bearded over, showed red as a steak unbroiled. That of the driver, on the other hand, gleamed white as the blooms of a Candlestick-of-the-Lord plant. Evidently she had the one efficient complexion for the Southwest climate, so disastrous to most—the sort known in beauty shops back East as "natural brunette pallor." Zena Barnett, unrivaled in her own clear, rich coloring, couldn't help wondering how the same sun could have such diverse effect upon the faces of two denizens of the range.

"Stop her, gal-alive!"

The onlookers heard the command, bellowed by the white beard; saw the vehicle slide to a stop under suddenly applied emergency brakes; realized that the young chauffeur, despite the regardless eccentricity of their entrance upon the scene, had her "bus" under perfect control. None of the three, however, was in the least prepared for what came next.

"Pitch them paws!"

With the rumbled order a six-gun of the old-

fashioned revolver type was whisked from nowhere and thrown down upon the tourists. The pointing of an accustomed automatic pistol would have been plenty to shock any or all of them out of their sophisticated calm, but this blue-black blunderbuss of cannon-diameter mouth, in the hands of a bearded wild man whom none ever had seen before, was terrifying.

They needed no native interpreter to translate what was desired, neither waited they for any formal agreement to obey. Three pairs of hands shot upward. One pair—two hands of the six—trembled noticeably in mid-air. They belonged to him who had commented first and most facetiously upon the approach of this truly "daffy" buggy. He, as well as Miss Barnett, was a Quaker of those straightest-stock Quakers of Philadelphia, and his overnice little name was Cecil Joseph Rackowe.

Yet he was the first to notice that the veteran with the gun looked even more amazed than he himself felt by their perfunctory behavior.

"What's the matter, pop?" he managed to inquire with admirable aplomb, considering that his hands still waved like aspens in the air. "We never meant to offend one hair of your hirsute mask."

Although the gun arm of the instigator of the

holdup did not lower, his whiskers twitched as if from a grin underneath.

"Not you, folks—I'm not after you-uns," he advised them. "If you'll just slide outen the picture and leave me get a bead on a certain cringy greaser what's hugging yon palm——"

The first response was Miss Barnett's laugh, rather weak from strength of her relief. Seizing the nearer of Cecil Joseph's still aspiring hands, she dragged him and herself out of the sight line. A smothered but indignant imprecation burst from the third of the Easterners—Robert Crozier, New York City—as he, too, obliged. The target range was clear.

"Come from behint that there umbereller, 'Scary' Gonzales!" roared the veteran. "Don't you know your tummy's bulgin' out both sides of the stem? Say, I'm the slickest slicer of bacon with lead yerabouts. Don't you realize that?"

Again were the pilgrims completely surprised. They had seen no Mexican behind their shade tree, but one now emerged. Into the roadway he shuffled, his hands high as he could lift them above the butts of two guns that protruded above his decorative, scarlet waistband. His sobriquet was explained by certain marks on his face, where a knife, probably

that of some virago, had indexed chapters of his past.

"Don' keel—you please not keel Scary, Mister Señor Lambert," he whimpered in a voice absurdly out of size with his build.

"Who said what about killin'?" demanded the man with the gun. "Come nigher. Quit your shiverin'. If El Presidente Obregon's men ever back you up against a whitewashed wall for executin' purposes, by darn, they'll have to spray with a brace of machine guns to get you!"

With death-march steps that Handel well might have incorporated into the score of "Saul," the native from below the near-by international boundary line approached the battered flivver. When within several yards he looked as though he would kneel in the dust, deep and thick enough to serve as a pillow through the lengthiest mercy prayer.

However, with a sweep of the gun, Lambert held him to his feet. "Keep a-standin', fool of a fellow! I ain't aimin' to kill you, unless maybe with kindness. Don't want your life nohow—just want to pay you."

"To—to pay, señor?"

"Sure. Been owin' you that twenty quite a spell." The old man spoke in tones which probably were as

nearly conversational as any he could achieve. "Nothin' painful or dangerous about it. Just want to swab the slate."

"No, no; Señor Lambert owe Scary no-thing. *Mea culpa, mea culpa!*"

At the Mexican's continued protest, the red cheeks above the white beard flared redder than before.

"Want me to get right mad?" he roared again. "You heard me say I owed you a twenty—one double eagle. Here she is."

From a khaki pocket the irascible debtor extracted a gold piece and tossed it literally between the bare toes of the frightened *cholo*. A gun-point gesture was necessary to persuade him to pick up the coin.

"Now vamose 'fore my finger gets twitchy!"

Scarcely could Scary Gonzales be seen through the dust he raised down the road toward the warrenlike native quarter of low adobe huts. Into the first run of this he soon disappeared.

The terrifying white who had routed him doffed his dusty, broad-brimmed, black-felt hat, the crown of which was "adorned" with two knife-cut air holes. His mustache and beard parted and quavered again in a repetition of his grin.

"You'll excuse my tendin' to business afore pleasure, amigos." He turned his megaphone voice toward

his audience of three. "Hope I didn't scare you loco. Sight of that there he tarantular blinded me to your being in the front row. But you weren't in no danger nohow—Betsy here will bark a word to that if you've got a mind to hear her speak up."

His caress of the old six-gun which so lately had controlled the situation made clear that the "Betsy" referred to was not the child of short, covering curls, who still held tensely the wheel, as if awaiting only a thought command to step on the gas again.

"Beg pardon, but is that the way you usually cancel your debts?" inquired Crozier, his eyes on the girl rather than her guardian, all trace of his former resentment gone. "I must say I wish my creditors would let me hold them up in some such manner. Alas, they reverse the operation!"

"Likely you all would be pleased to meet me—I'm Victor Valentine Lambert, otherwise known as 'Whitebush,' sole boss and owner of the Arizomex Ranch. This here's my niece, lady and gents. She's Angelica Lambert and peppery tempered as if she'd been christened 'Chili' instead."

As he seemed to expect a response to this mannerly overture, Cecil Joseph Rackowe pronounced the names of his companions and himself, adding the somewhat superfluous information that all were from

the East, stopping at the Sundown Rest Hotel and hoping to derive benefit from the medicinal wells which he thought should have been, and in any other section would have been, called "springs." Back and forth general nods were exchanged, as also glances of further appraisement. But the men, as if by mutual consent, omitted the formality of hand-shaking.

The more the young chauffeur nodded and looked, however, the lower she drooped toward the wheel and the more completely her black hair veiled her white features. Only the twin gleams of dark eyes that peered from beneath the straw sombrero's brim, first at one and then at another of them, attested the spice of the disposition ascribed to her, rather than the meekness of her present mood.

"If you think my way of wiping the slate queer" —Lambert evidently was considering Crozier's question—"you'll allow the debt's queerer. You see, what with my buying cattle here and there and my scattered ranching interests, I got to keep moving about the country quite some.

"Afore I got the anti-mobile here, I drove a span of mules," the ranchman went on. "One day this Mexican, Gonzales, jumps out of a paloverde clump and sticks a gun into my countenance, demanding my

roll, which happened to be nigh about four hundred. I was far from home and in a strange section. I told him he left me broke and grubless—asked him the loan of twenty, which he done. Never brung eyes on him from that day to this, when I see him hovering round evidently considering whether he wouldn't hold up you folks right here in the heart of the meetropolis."

"We certainly are obliged to you!" exclaimed the Philadelphia beauty, with a sweet, lingering, radiant smile which many younger and more polished men would have behaved doughtily to earn.

"Pleasure's mine," grunted the ranchman, obviously and for the first time embarrassed in the presence of the effete visitors.

Rackowe came to the rescue in his pleasant, tactful way. "That aborigine didn't look to me as if he'd ever have paid you back the four-hundred roll he made you loan him, eh, old top?"

"No; he don't look as if he would," agreed Lambert. "You flung your tongue around a fact that time, young feller."

"You might have had him arrested and punished, though. Wouldn't that have been the part of good citizenship?"

The Westerner seemed to accept the criticism in

good part, perhaps because so delicately put. "Might have been for the good of other cits, but not for Whitebush Lambert. You see, Scary Gonzales is a bandit."

"Isn't that all the more reason?" interposed Zena Barnett, who had nodded approval of the question opened by her friend.

"All the more reason for paying back borrowed money," the rancher supplied. "Scary's wa'n't the first holdup perpetrated on yours respectfully. When they had the drop I always dug. Never even reported 'em, though they all was acquaintances I recognized at onct. You see, if I had, the next outlaw as wanted a helping hand would have shot from the bush, and I wouldn't be here telling you me sad little tale."

"Surely you aren't going to disagree with Mr. Lambert, Cecil," observed Crozier with thinly veiled contempt. "He seems to have thee-and-thou leanings that ought to keep you from starting a row."

The ranchman showed that he got the Quaker reference by looking amused. "I'm peaceful enough—with bandits," he said. "But I wouldn't advise other peaceable folks to tramp my toes none. Let loose, Angel!"

The strangely silent creature at the wheel—she had

taken no more part in the colloquy than if she had been a hired driver—suddenly did let loose. At once something above the rattletrap began to shake as if with ague and throb and buzz and whine. Like nothing in the world but the crazy streak it had looked just before arrival, it leaped and wabbled toward the center of the town.

For an amazed moment the Easterners stared after it in silence.

"What a cute old thing he is!" sincerely proclaimed the belle of several metropolitan sets.

On Robert Crozier's handsome face was the companion to her smile. "And I'm here to add," said he, "what a cute young thing is she."

"You mean the child, Robert?" asked Zena.

"None other than the silent angel of peppery repute. Say, did you notice those flirtatious eyes of hers, looking through her veil of hair?"

"You're a dub—they weren't flirtatious at all." The snapped objection of Cecil Joseph Rackowe gained the stares of the two others. "Besides, Zena, she is no child. The old chap's niece is a woman grown—a woman in trouble, at that!"

Zena continued her surprised inspection of him, then laughed softly as she remarked: "Cecil—the impressionable!"

"I'm afraid he couldn't have made any profound impression on his trouble girl," observed Crozier. "His hands understudied a wash on the line in the wind when he was so good as to comply with Mr. Lambert's first request. A ranch-bred filly well might have misunderstood his constitutional amiability."

Rackowe reddened, and the gleam in the eyes which he turned upon his rival was a warning. "My fears didn't, therefore shouldn't, concern you, Crozier. They were all for Zena. The trembling of my hands was from a very excusable desire to grab that gun."

The girl brought her palms together in silent applause. "Well turned, Cecil, and thank you for your fears."

Crozier looked, as he felt, disgusted, with the way this finished young man usually could take all tricks. To think that a woman of Zena Barnett's intelligence could be so taken in. He yielded to a sudden, vehement desire to be by himself.

"Since you're so pleased with Cecil Joseph, you won't mind his escorting you back to the hotel?" he asked the cultured coquette. "A little matter of unfinished business, don't you know, calls me downtown."

Doffing his Panama, he turned and started along the path that served as sidewalk. Rackowe and the

girl started the other way. But it chanced that each looked back, as if in response to a mutual impulse, in time to see the third of their party and their Arizona sponsor turn into the warren of the native village. What possible interest could the New Yorker have in trailing a scar-faced, barefooted bandit? The question, although unvoiced, teased the mind of both.

CHAPTER II

BAD MEDICINE

ALTHOUGH the normal population of Mesquite Wells numbered less than a thousand, the town supported a national bank. The fact will surprise none acquainted in what have been called our scattered States, of which Arizona deserves the word.

Where the commonwealth's pair of United States senators are known in person to practically every citizen within the boundaries, the Federal treasury's most valued franchise is distributed with scant consideration for census figures. At that, M. W.—as Mesquite Wells was known for short—banked for a territory larger than Connecticut and Rhode Island put together, including those depositors and borrowers from the country that is trying to forget its past reputation of being in name and ill fame "The Republic of Trouble."

Direct to the Lariat National, this early afternoon, Whitebush Lambert ordered himself driven by his tractable, although not necessarily devoted, niece. A

low adobe building housed the mart of livestock finance, squeezed in between the frame of Sam Prior's general outfitting store and the corrugated-iron shack in which a Celestial, who had entitled himself Sunny Lung, conducted—or misconducted, as the case might be—a chop house.

The hour of the Lamberts' arrival turned out to be inauspicious, despite their early start from the Arizomex Ranch and the fact that the chauffeur had stood on the gas so much of the way that she was complaining of a pain in the sole of her foot.

"It's the darn-fool siesta hour, as if there wa'n't enough night to sleep off anything that could happen to a body these here dry days," grumbled he of the white "bush," after vainly having rattled the door of the Lariat. "H. C. L. must be home taking his mid-day beauty sleep."

He referred, not to the high cost of living, despite the assortment of initials used, but to one Henry Clay Livermore, who was not only president and cashier, but also paying and receiving teller of the Lariat National.

The tone of the girl's answer was even more disagreeable than that of her guardian. "I reckon anybody that ever eyed Henry Clay oughtn't to complain of his taking a beauty nap—doing what he can for

himself. Told you there wasn't any need of crowding the bus, not to mention me."

"You tell me so many things my eardrums get wore out listening," the uncle said gruffly, although this was her first remark in many miles and more minutes. "'Tanyrate, he can't yowl that I didn't come pronto. He's got to admit that delay ain't my middle name."

"Even if you do put off till to-morrow your overdues!"

At the sneer in the weary, old-sounding voice of his young-looking niece, Whitebush scowled and didn't bother to expurgate an imprecation or two in courtesy to her allegedly gentle sex. The previous day the banker had sent a Mexican youth on a mad motor cycle out to the border-line ranch. The messenger bore a more or less peremptory summons that the stockman appear at the bank before three o'clock this day. Angelica's gibe referred to unmet "paper"—a sizable sheaf of notes which the Lariat National had been collecting through several years of costly drought.

He had tried to convince both himself and her that the hurry call might involve some formality of signing renewals. The effort, however, had proved a great drain upon the store of optimism that had be-

come the best asset of one who, until nicked by right of range, had been born and lived up to the ambitious name of Victor Valentine.

"Maybe you'll leave me to handle the finances of this here family without horning in, young woman," was the extent of his defense.

"And maybe I won't a second longer than I have to. If you go on handling them like you've always done since dad——" She stopped, as she usually did at the mention of a tragedy which, ten years before, had deprived her at once of protection and the sole object of her young life's devotion.

Lambert filled in unfeelingly: "Don't start whining about that might-have-been father of yorn! Best thing he ever done was to clean out afore he spoiled your life, like he done my sister's. How many times do I have to tell you that she died of a broken——"

"She didn't, either—don't you dare tell me that again!" No longer was Angelica's voice weary. The whole box of pepper spiced it. "My mother died when I was born; she died giving birth, which any woman takes a chance of doing when she gets married, even to the man she loves with all her heart. You know it—liar! You take it back, what you said, or I'll——"

"A'right, a'right, she did then," grumbled the older

fire eater. "What I was about to say is that we'd best kill the intervening time by putting on our feed bags. Dismount the Lizzie!"

They entered the Chinaman's. While ordering and waiting for their meal, the girl's attention was absorbed in outwardly apparent dislike for her mother's only brother. Strange that he who maintained so happy-go-lucky an attitude toward the world at large should be such a tyrant toward the helpless creature at present in his power—herself! She hated him, she told herself; so why should she be pleasant over his willingness to make up? Why oil the wheels of conversation?

His choice of topics did interest her, though, particularly the one of the tourists he unintentionally had held up at the head of Center Street a few minutes before. Although at first she made no response, she did listen to his efforts to change the subject into lines she might like, just as if, actually, he was becoming more afraid of her than she of him.

"They looked like folks, didn't they?" he asked. "The woman was a lady and a looker, at that, don't you think so?"

"You ain't often so near right, Uncle V. V. She was plumb beautiful."

"Which one of the dudes, do you allow, Angy, that she's hitched to?"

"Hitched? She wasn't hitched to either."

Whitebush attempted to chuckle teasingly. "Just because you wanta think a thing is no reason it's so. I seen you oglin' the dark, good-looking sport."

"Then you seen crooked. The one I stared at had sandy hair."

"And you ain't ashamed of it, eh? How come you to like his looks, gal alive, beside that he-donis? It's just like a loco female, though, banking every chip on that old law of opposites. I'll bet you'd turn down the best man west of the Pecos if he wasn't light complected, just because you're dark as a greaser and the idjot age of nineteen."

Her dark eyes flamed. "I ain't dark as a greaser, except my hair and eyes. You know my skin's whiter than your heart. And I'll be twenty a week from Tuesday—you know that well!"

"That's right," he admitted. "Over twenty-one years it was now, since your ma let that good-for-naught fetch her from glorious Montana down to the border and——"

"You put a hackamore on that talk, V. V.!"

Angelica Colville—now legally Lambert because of an adoption upon which the uncle had insisted for

reasons unexplained by his treatment of her—looked somehow dangerous, slight and pale as she was. At least she looked enough so to be obeyed.

Her foster parent's mind never had been clear as to what she would do if flouted when in such moods, but he was sure—abso-lutely—that she'd do it. More and more, as now, he was coming to humor her in what he termed her tantrums. He thought it advisable to return to the subject of Cecil Joseph Rackowe.

"What I didn't take to in that taller, lighter dude was the way he trembled under the gun. Shook like a snake, didn't he?"

"Yes; he did," the girl admitted. "Seems like the bigger the hombre and the nicer his silk shirts, the less nerve he's got."

"Well then!" The old fellow pounced upon her in triumph. "If you agree he ain't got no nerve, why do you like him?"

But the black glare of Angelica's great eyes showed her spirit undaunted. "I didn't say I liked him. I said he was the specimen I ogled."

"But why ogle him?"

She was quite willing to tell him why—a woman's reason. "I was looking for some likelier reason than fear to explain his shakes."

Whitebush grunted his disgust. "There you go

again—fool female to the core! Just because he's lightish, and you therefore like his looks, you set out to find excuses for his faults. You'd be mothering him if he ever gave you the chanct, like you do all the mavericks what herd your way—like your mother done your——"

"Maybe you'd be more of a man if you ever felt the want of a mite of mothering, V. V. Lambert," suggested she who never was permitted to forget her dependency. "And maybe that pilgrim will need the mothering of some one if all the men folks are going to mistake him like you. 'Pears to me, if I pretended to be a man, I'd want to see a stranger's feet in stirrups before I judged him no good. For me, I got an idea that particular dude has nerve enough in his system. It's only that it hasn't come out on him yet."

After that she set her ripe lips tight. From the way Victor Valentine glowered over his chop suey, she realized that for once she'd said too much—had incited a prospective argument which probably never would reach an end—all for sake of an Easterner whom she wasn't likely ever to see again. She was forearmed for his next attack.

"All I got to say to you is that you'll get the worst of it if you insist on sizing up men for yourself. You

ain't no wiser than the most of women. And even if you could pick a winner, you likely couldn't rope him. You ain't got no figger, no more'n a boy, and little enough face. Land knows, the way things is framing up on the range, you ain't going to have no fortune.

"So if I can do the cutting out of a he-man for you, you'd best leave me and be satisfied," Lambert continued. "You keep your eyes on the trail and offen strangers is my advice to you, my gal. I'll admit you been a whole heap of trouble and expense to me, but for your ma's sake I want to get you harnessed right. Reckon the sooner Regal Frosby puts his O. S. brand on you the better."

"The sooner the worse!" the defiance on Angelica's pale little face seemed to say. But she didn't speak; it would have been no use. She contented herself with tapping a handleless teacup against the rice bowl that had been placed before her.

A conversational slump fell between them. They ate the succulent suey and drank tea without further waste of words.

But although her lips were silent, the "angel's" mind spoke verbosely. She guessed that when she got hitched she'd have something to say about the buckling. As for letting Regal Frosby burn the

brand of the Open-But-Shut Ranch upon her—well, Uncle V. V.'s way of putting the proposition didn't make it the more attractive. For the thousandth time she considered the husky owner of the ranch next door to her home Arizomex in the rôle which he aspired to fill as the foreman of Mrs. Angelica Frosby.

At that, even though quite without a return of sentiment on her part, the transfer would not be without advantage; it would take her from under the domination of the foster parent she had come to hate, despite the blood affection she was supposed to feel for her sole remaining relative.

If only Regal came by his cattle honestly! But then, who was she, waif left to the bounty of an Uncle Victor Valentine, to advocate the fine points of personal selectiveness? And yet she was herself, wasn't she—her one and only self?

"When are you going to get down to cases with that there feller of yours?" His meal finished, Whitebush spared her his attention.

The girl hesitated over her reply, even as she had hesitated the night before over a similar demand from him most directly concerned. A glance through the front window offered opportunity for postponing the answer.

"There goes the banker—H. C. L. himself!" she exclaimed and sprang ready for action to her feet.

"S'pose there's only one thing to do with bad medicine—swoller her down." With grimace and groan, Whitebush forgot lighter issues in his affairs of tangled finance. "Come along and get a hustle on you, gal alive!"

Pushing back from the table, he paid for the meal, then stamped off toward the bank next door, leaving Angelica to follow.

Henry Clay Livermore was a fox of a man, inwardly imbued with the cunning of Reynard, as well as outwardly with his long, sharp nose and beady eyes. A pronounced weakness for the "soft sex" led him to waste a word or two on his creditor's niece, unworthy of his notice, as the uncle thought her. After a futile five-minute effort to strike fire from a quick temper that had diverted him since her babyhood, Livermore told her she was a prairie rose thorn covered like a cactus and that it was too bad she hadn't been born a generation earlier, when he would have had time to pluck off her thorns.

Angelica, not wishing to quarrel with him for substantial reasons, but resenting such insincere babblings, was relieved when her uncle interrupted with the re-

minder that Livermore had sent for him as if there was some hurry about something.

"And high time it is I should send for you. Haven't I got forty thousand dollars of your paper, Victor?" The banker made the transition flintily. "I'd like you to reduce the loan by one half. Sit you down."

Old Whitebush laughed uneasily as he settled himself in the chair indicated on the opposite side of the flat-topped desk. "It's a pleasant day," he declared, "and it won't rain."

"Come now, forget the shilly-shally, the weather included," rejoined H. C. L. "I'm talking dollars to you, old-timer. We must have twenty thousand now—mind you, no beating around the bush!"

"Might as well ask for a million. I could pay as easily."

Lambert spoke the truth. He was in the position of seventy-five per cent of the live-stock growers of the West at that moment—broke. His direct, dark eyes changed looks with the shifty, amber ones of "The Fox."

CHAPTER III

TAKE YOUR CHOICE

THE situation should have been tense; it was for Banker Livermore and the niece of the man in his clutch. Calling loans was a trial to H. C. L.; oft-times forced into play all his cunning. He did not believe this any blood-from-turnip case; he was firmly convinced that the old ranchman had many thousands cached away on one side or another of the boundary. How to make him produce without exciting him into one of his violent outbursts was the problem.

Within that curious, hard-working organ called by the uncle "Angel's buzz-saw mind" was the conviction, on the other hand, that her relative had told the truth in declaring that the bank president might as well have asked for a million as twenty thousand. She knew, at least, that conditions on the big international ranch were at the lowest ebb of her experience. For a moment she feared that V. V., if pressed too hard, would go for his gun—the Betsy he had used during the previous hour to demonstrate

his odd sense of humor upon the scarred bandit—and would mess things regrettably.

But never in crucial moments did Lambert behave according to Hoyle or reasonable conclusion. In face of Livermore's demand he appeared to have become strangely at his ease. He looked the part of all his names, whether parental or pardner bestowed; looked at least to think himself both Victor the conqueror and Valentine the all-powerful. The while, he leisurely stroked his whitebush mask. Far from resorting to his gun and counter threat, he leaned back in his chair, crossed his legs, produced and lighted his pipe.

The girl, knowing Lambert from having often been his victim in other such moods, stiffened in her straight-backed chair across the room and waited, well-nigh breathless.

"First off, Henery," the ranchman said, "get out of your mind any lurking belief in the rumor that I got a lot of gold buried. I ain't and that's that until Hades freezes." The statement seemed to issue from the stubble around his lips. "In round figures you're holding forty thousand on my stock. Likely you'd best send out to Arizomex and take the whole blame outfit afore they starve on the hoof. You're welcome to all you can get outen the herd."

The range financier looked startled. It was disconcerting to the fox strain within him to have his mind read with the accuracy indicated by Whitebush's declaration regarding buried reserve, before the banker had opportunity to charge him with concealing assets. As a matter of fact, he had not expected that Lambert would cut the loan in half; but that he would, in the vernacular of the region, "flop his bunch" was too much even for foxy equanimity.

"I don't want to be hard on you, old-timer," he countered, nervously fluffing the thin hair over his bald spot. "Wouldn't like to take your cattle away from you; in fact, haven't any place to corral them. Suppose you make a shipment and let the Lariat National have the proceeds on account."

Angelica turned anxious eyes her uncle's way. She didn't know a great deal about business, but felt that promissory notes were debts of honor. She hoped the imperturbable old skinflint would not add the weight of welshing to the already heavy burden of shame she was carrying on his account.

"The Yellow Meadow bunch looked right fit when I rode out there yesterday," she ventured to suggest.

Lambert's laugh was of I-should-worry timbre. "The Lariat National sure could declare some dividend on any shipment Arizomex could make at the

present time! Take Regal Frosby's experience, for example. He shipped a bunch worth seventy-five hundred dollars at current Chicago prices. When he'd paid the outrageous freight and other expenses, he had exactly six bits left—one-hundredth of a cent on the dollar profit he figured."

"Regal always was a cultus business man," snorted the banker. "He comes so easily by most of his stock that he just naturally lets it get away from him the same."

The girl started, from a natural impulse, to resent the insult to a man whom her guardian regarded in the light of a future nephew-in-law; then bit her scarlet underlip, clenched her thin hands, and held silence. There was no use fussing against the truth, she adjured herself.

The suitor who was the only hope of escape from her present state of slavery did run cattle across the border from the big Mexican ranchos, a practice not only dangerous, but downright dishonest to her mind, even if the deprived owners were of another race and held stock in such countless numbers that they never missed those he rustled.

Why couldn't she be hitched with a running mate who was honest? Her father had been honest. Never must she allow herself to forget that. She was re-

lieved that neither of the men seemed to notice her tension.

Lambert again was insisting explosively: "You take my cows, Henry Clay, and we'll call the account square. I'm a bum gambler, and dinged if I'll go any longer agin' the packin'-house skin game, with the railroads already sanding the cards. I'm tired selling beef at five or ten cents a pound, I tell you, when I have to pay fifty cents for raw steak and a dollar per if it's broiled in a restaurant. I'm ready to go a-looking for a job that's somewhat connected with pay."

The banker looked shocked, but with concern for himself, not at the prospect of Lambert, well past middle age, leaving the open range for a cooped-up existence in some town. He knew only too well that if the owner of Arizomex were compelled to liquidate present values, his stock would not repay the money which the bank had loaned on them. In other words, he was holding the sack and unless there came a turn of luck for the live-stock men, its emptiness would prove costly.

The situation just outlined by the ranchman in the adobe bank building of Mesquite Wells was by no means local. On every hand throughout the West, both cow and sheepmen were in trouble, many of

them unable to provide gasoline for the high-priced limousines they had bought with the tremendous profits made at the beginning of the World War period. Their heavy losses, potential or real, had foundation in three years' protraction of an unprecedented drought.

The Federal Reserve Board had ordered deflation, and the bottom had fallen out of the cattle market, no matter whether the grower shipped to Denver, Omaha, Kansas City, or Chicago. Always have stockmen been large borrowers of money, and from them in the past most regional bankers had waxed fat. But this time, loans on both cattle and sheep had been made at the peak of valuation, and now that prices had tumbled and freights risen beyond endurance they were finding their bargains bad.

As H. C. L. studied the prospect made drab by the veteran's denial of any hidden reserve of cash, his glance happened downward on the commercial report that had come to him in the morning mail. It read:

> Every sheep in New Mexico, and there are several million of them, is mortgaged for eight dollars, while the present market price is but six dollars a head.

And farther down the page his eyes continued to an item that particularly concerned him.

> Three months ago Arizona cattle were worth from sixty to seventy dollars a head; now their market value is about half that.

It was evident that Lambert knew the situation, that he could not be stampeded into making any sacrifice to protect his credit. The banker found himself in the position of that historic individual who had hold of the bear's tail. To let it go, which in this instance meant foreclosure, would be far more disastrous than to hold and hope. It was time for the Reynard in his nature to assert itself. The eyes again lifted to the border man's shone yellow through his nose glasses.

"Whitebush, if I show you a chance for us both to get up and out of the hole we're in, are you game?"

The conventional squares within squares of the linoleum rug ceased, either really or apparently, to interest the niece of her uncle. She awaited the answer to the question even more concernedly than he who put it. Any change in the financial prospects of the family might mean her escape from the Regal

Frosby prospect. With Livermore's, her gaze fixed upon the bush mask, in which the two black, beetle-browed eyes gleamed maliciously.

"You going to deal me a hand from a stacked deck, Henry?" the rancher asked with caution.

"So long as it's a winning hand you shouldn't concern yourself with any more than the expert playing of it."

"Deal!"

A moment's pause followed the growled command. The while, Livermore figuratively shuffled the pack; then he said:

"Stopping at the Grover Cleveland at this identical moment are three cards of a royal flush—king, queen, and jack, shall we say, of the heart suit."

"Never knew a busted royal to get me nowheres, except perhaps on a bluff," objected Lambert. "Ain't I told you I was tired of gambling?"

"But this flush won't be busted by the time I'm through dealing, old-timer." Henry Clay held consistently to the poker simile. "Consider yourself the heart ace and myself the ten spot. We have a hand that can't be beaten."

"I see the ace and ten plain enough, but——" The hoary head waggled doubtingly.

The banker leaned forward in eager assurance.

"The king is one Robert Crozier of New York, too wise to the West to buy any pigs in pokes, but with all kinds of money in the bank. For jack we have Mr. Cecil Rackowe, a fleecy lamb if one ever came over the Santa Fe trail, not worth much in his own right, but with thousands of other people's Quaker money to invest, mind you; for I've inquired concerning him. The queen in our hand is Mrs. Leonora Barnett, Philadelphia widow, rich and certainly looks it."

For the first time since their entrance Lambert remembered the presence of his young relative. "What was the names of them fancy birds what thought I was sticking of them up, Angy?"

"Same men—the king and jack," she replied with her ungirlish brevity. "The lady had looks, but she wasn't a widow. Miss Barnett, they called her. I remember distinctly."

"Waal, girl alive, mightn't she be a widdy, but grass?"

"No," decided Livermore. "The maiden to whom Angelica refers is the queen widow's daughter. We'll leave her in the pack for some one else to draw. You begin to get my idea, Whitebush?"

The rancher held out one gnarled hand; for a moment he studied the five fingers thereof as though

they were the cards of the simile. "Too much of a handful," he objected at last.

"Then take your choice—king, queen, or jack, a different lay-down for each. Or maybe you'll find it necessary to play them all in turn."

"Just maybe I might," was the thoughtful admission.

The amber eyes of the banker flashed around at the young third of their group. An annoyed frown furrowed his brow. After a moment's consideration he arose and signaled the rancher to follow him.

"Will you excuse us, my dear child?" he asked her solicitously, after his accustomed way with women, as though her agreement mattered. "I want your uncle to step into the counting room and check up on just where we stand."

The girl made no response, realizing that none was necessary. Only in active thought could she accompany the two, whom she knew to be unscrupulous, out of the private office and to a stand in a far corner of the front banking room, where stood a desk with open ledgers atop.

From there she could hear them conversing for several minutes in subdued tones. The game probably wasn't straight, she advised herself; else why was a secret conference necessary before the playing of a

royal flush? But naturally it couldn't be, with Uncle V. V.'s knees beneath the green-baize table.

She did not trouble even to look surprised when, on their return, the related plotter announced that he and she would not drive back to Arizomex Ranch that night. She had been so extra pepperish and looked so tuckered, he said, that he had decided, for sake of giving her a rest, to stand the expense of a stop-over, with a stay at the new Mesquite Well's hotel.

CHAPTER IV

LADY IN LAVENDER

ACROSS the palm-studded patio of the Grover Cleveland, where, most unexpectedly in such a land of little rain, a fountain gurgled, slowly proceeded a woman who was a conspicuous example of the beauty and grace possible to what is known as a certain age. Tall, neither too slender nor too heavy, she wore her years like an ornament. She was simply but expensively dressed in a medium-length gown of eyeletted lavender linen.

In her right hand she carried a shepherd's crook, to the staff of which was tied a deep purple bisnaga bloom. But she did not lean upon it or show other signs of the ailment that was responsible for her presence at the frontier hostelry. After testing the prevailing breeze, which mostly did not prevail, she composed herself in a wicker chair that semed to hold the coolest position, there to await the post-prandial gathering of her party.

Any one who had seen Zena Barnett would not

have needed to look twice at the lady in lavender to note a resemblance which stamped the older beautiful woman as the closest relative of her one half as young. Some of the pleasure of the two in being so much together undoubtedly was due to the fact that they showed each other off. Everybody admitted, as they themselves must have realized, that they were most becoming to each other. Among the Philadelphia élite it was said that the Widow Leonora was the best possible advertisement her daughter could have.

The older beauty proved that the advancing years need have none of the usual terrors for the younger. The daughter was a delightful reminder that the mother merely had evoluted from one stage of charm into another. Both gray eyed, bronze haired, clear skinned, sweet voiced, they were enough alike, yet sufficiently different, to enjoy both contrast and resemblance. And a love that was a revelation to mothers and daughters who got less of sympathy and joy from their relationship bound these two in a companionableness that was a pleasure to their friends as well as to themselves.

The particular cloud on Zena's horizon was her mother's suffering from one of those unaccountable attacks of neuritis that often afflict the fair of her

years. There were society acquaintances unkind enough to whisper that the semi-invalid rôle was assumed for effect—as an excuse for the lines and outlines of middle age. But none would have dared suggest such heresy to the devout Zena. And her mother, convinced that she was ill, suffered in mind if not in body.

The daughter's tender solicitude was responsible for their presence in Mesquite Wells, a place they had not suspected of being on the map of the world a month before. Robert Crozier, fascinated by Zena's dazzling beauty when presented to her at the Bachelors and Benedicts' annual ball at the Bellevue-Stratford Hotel, had instituted a suit this last winter that virtually had made him a commuter over the Pennsylvania between Gotham and Quakertown. Zena's one trouble—concern over the adored parent's state of health—had led him to urge that they try the wonderful rheumatic cures effected at the M. W. Arizona border springs, with which he had become acquainted when developing the mine that was the foundation of his considerable fortune.

Without hinting that business necessity forced him on a Western trip, he had suggested a personally conducted pilgrimage thereto, knowing well that Zena would constitute herself a devoted nurse; also that,

by effecting her absence from the East, he would protect his own heart interests against a certain pestiferous young "Quaker" who semed to have yards of inside track. So glowing was his tribute to the curative possibilities of the "Wells" that the Barnetts had responded hopefully.

The march on his rival, however, was not stolen. Cecil Joseph Rackowe hadn't been born of shrewd, gray-clad stock for nothing. Having disliked and distrusted the New York interloper from their first handshake, he didn't second the handsome suitor's proposition of enjoying three months in a strange environment with the exquisite creature more or less formally assigned to himself by a "family understanding."

Equipping himself with the excuse of—and the money for—a possible Western investment, he had declared himself in on the health-seeking expedition. With their wonted unanimity, mother and daughter had acclaimed the foursome suggestion. Crozier had been obliged to conceal his chagrin as best he might, even to pretend to welcome the addition to what he had planned as a Rackowe-elimination party.

To the three who had been so lately converted to see America, the wonderland of the West had unfolded most entertainingly from the windows of one

of the swiftest overland limited trains. An El Paso & Southern local had carried them to Douglas, Arizona, whence they had driven east to Mesquite.

Two weeks they had spent at the palm-set hotel named for the presidential ideal of a proprietor who hailed originally from Buffalo and never would forget that he was an original Cleveland democrat. Although so far the treatment at the Wells had not been of any manifest benefit to the family neuritis, Crozier had managed to pour into their ears so much of hope that they had heard no hint of the prevailing regional disbelief in the claim of medicinal properties for the welling waters.

This late afternoon Mrs. Barnett leaned back in her chair and gave her eyes to the home-defense campaign of a bush-tit couple whose nest in a flowering mesquite had aroused the envy of a cactus wren. It was a fight of band against spot, the wren spotted black and emitting shrill *churr-churr* cries as the usually trustful hopping chickadees protected themselves by their quickness of wing. That the larger bird at last gave up the contest against the smaller pair was a cause of satisfaction to the onlooker.

Leonora Barnett tried always to occupy her mind; refused to worry over her tortured nerves, since worry was as aging as it was unavailing. As the

time for dinner approached, however, she did permit her thoughts to hover around what she had come to acknowledge as the problem of Zena. It really was time, she realized, for her daughter to be determining the general direction of that free-flying thing, her own very sweet will.

In plainer words, the young woman should make up her mind and get herself matrimonially settled. While even a partial loss of her child would cause her a severe wrench, Leonora was determined not to be selfish and must not overlook the fact that Zena, while fresh as a dewy-dawn rosebud, was approaching the rather full-blown life hour of seven and twenty.

During the months and years since the girl's formal début, all through her brilliant social successes up to the recent appearance of Robert Crozier, none of her many suitors had received serious maternal consideration except Cecil Joseph Rackowe. About him they knew all that was to be known—his superior family connections, his dignified profession as a chemist, his income which, while not so large as Zena's, was comfortable.

The mother had now to confess, however, that Crozier was a fit rival. He was rich and had the polish of a man of the world with a faculty for ini-

tiative which would seem to assure a successful future for the woman who became his life partner. Her hope that their present Western trip would bring to a decision the youthful replica of herself so surfeited with adulation had become almost as determinative as her hope of a cure.

But the fancy of a girl was variable. Which of these two eligibles would Zena choose? If only Cecil Joseph would show a trifle more of the caveman quality! If only Robert would be not quite so vague about his antecedents! If only the Rackowes were not so let-well-enough-alone! If only the Croziers were a little less aggressive!

So taxing was this which-man puzzle that the mother was tempted to put the question direct to the vision in hemstitched pink lawn which just then floated lightly down the steps of the lobby that connected the two hotel wings and joined her in the front yard.

"Oh, I hope you haven't been waiting for me tiresomely long, lovely Leonora!" The girl caught and pressed her sister-mother's hand.

"A pleasure to wait little or long for lovely Zena!" Mrs. Barnett said with a return of the fond smile.

The temptation of putting the question was dis-

counted by the appearance of the masculine component which formed its two equal parts.

Cecil Joseph, in faultlessly pressed blue serge, reached them first. His inquiry over Mrs. Barnett's feelings that particular evening and hour was honestly solicitous, almost filial. His eyes, which were blue and pronounced his best feature, spoke the compliments which both women so well deserved on this as on most occasions. He never ceased to enjoy, he told them, their incomparable looks.

Crozier's appearance was punctuated with apologies over his not having changed from daytime pongee. The unfinished business that had taken him back to town had detained him longer than he had expected.

"Did you find your bandit interesting, on further acquaintance?" The blunder popped from Rackowe, as blunders often did.

Zena glanced up at him quickly, surprised at this evidence that his thought on seeing Crozier enter the native quarters had coincided with her own, but more surprised that he should have committed the breach of seeming to pry into the affairs of his rival.

Just a trace of a frown shadowed Crozier's face as he asked: "*My* bandit? What bandit?"

"Why, the barefooted one—the aborigine that Santa Claus held up to pay the twenty to." Cecil Joseph

reddened under realization of his recurrent tactlessness, although he grinned urbanely around the group.

"Oh, the greaser?" Crozier returned with exaggerated consideration. "The money paid him at gun point probably has been turned into aguardiente by now. If you are curious about the effect of that much Mexican home brew upon the innards and outards of one native you might meander down to the village after dinner and eyewitness results. As it happens, I wasn't after Scary's gold, Rackowe. If I find time this evening, I'll make you a diagram of what did occupy my afternoon."

The dinner triangle clanged, as if in acclaim of the modern, mannerly passes between these two rivals, which in olden times probably would have led either to swords or pistols.

Cecil's verbal retort was nipped when he glanced into Mrs. Barnett's reproachful eyes. He held silence. Zena, pleased at his self-control, intervened. Although she felt that he deserved some punishment for his impertinence, she knew it was thoughtless.

As at the scene of the holdup, she came to his rescue. "Won't you make me a copy of the diagram, Robert?" she begged with mock concern. "If it's exact, it might interest me, particularly if it shows shadows of dusky señoritas."

Crozier, finding himself thus put upon the defensive, offered explanation of a search for some Aztec pottery, of which he had heard praise, a good example of which he had planned to obtain and offer as a souvenir to the fairest mother of the fair. "I am on a warm trail," he said, "but have not yet had——"

"Put-put-put; whang-zang-spat!"

Almost any explanation, no matter how adroit or on how vital a subject, must have been cut short by the explosive interruption. Startled, all turned to see the approach of a vehicular rattletrap.

"Well, I'll be—— No, I won't. Yes, I will. If they aren't our friends of the holdup!" sputtered Cecil. "You don't suppose——"

Crozier looked equally concerned. "Are they about to become fellow guests at Grover's?"

"I believe they are," Zena said, apparently amused. "From the mad pace at which they approach, you'd never think, Leonora, that the angel child at the wheel could pull up. But there—she's doing it—has done it—short! And look at them! Having found some place to go, they're all dressed up."

Mrs. Barnett, not yet having been told of the early-afternoon adventure, looked into the animated faces of the three others as though suspecting that they suddenly had lost their minds. Then, from force of ex-

ample, she turned her glance to the oddly assorted pair approaching.

Having alighted from their go-somehow-wagon and left it parked at the trailside, they now came bravely up the path, *sans* baggage except for a paper-wrapped bundle carried by the girl.

CHAPTER V

FROM ANOTHER WORLD

NEVER had either of the Lamberts been so much as over the threshold of the Grover Cleveland Hotel in the year since its erection. When not passing at the marvelous speed of their converted car to Douglas on the west side of M. W. or to Agua Prieta on the east, if compelled to spend the night in town they had put up at the unnamed hostelry run by a half-breed Mexican woman whom they long had known.

There was, however, no hitch about their present arrival. By telephone, Banker Livermore had arranged everything, even to the numbers of the rooms they were to occupy and the exact location of their seats in the dining room, all but deserted at this off season. In both requests the principal specification seemed to have been a proximity to the pilgrim party sponsored by Mr. Crozier of New York.

They evinced no throes of temperament, either embarrassment or elation, over entering the portals of the "tony" resort. Old Whitebush was not subject to

such, and his protégée had exhausted her available supply during the regarbing ordeal at Sam Prior's general store, from which she just had emerged.

This had been proposed by H. C. L. and seconded by Lambert. Angelica had been tractable enough when it came to gilding her prickly pear relative for this splash into a society pool. Heaven knew, as well as she and all Mesquite Wells, that his old clothes had been a disgrace longer than she would have admitted, except under duress. Vast improvement could be made from the conglomerate assortment of the country store, as it proved.

Starting at the crown and ending at the heel, Whitebush had acquired a stiff-brimmed Stetson, a varistriped silk shirt with collar attached, a cream-colored Palm Beach suit, silk socks with a loud-looking clock, and a pair of rubber-soled, tan canvas shoes.

As the length of his stay at the Grover Cleveland was indefinite, dependent entirely upon the success of this, his first costume, he refused pointblank to suggest or select a second, even a change of shirts, reminding the dealer of the hand that he could sneak down to Sam's any time and replenish if further investment seemed advisable.

The fine-feathering with an emergency trousseau of

the Lambert Angel had proved more difficult. The object of their would-be beneficence, in whom a grateful and receptive spirit might have been expected, had proved herself sadly misnamed.

"I'll not be made a holy show of before any pack of back Easters," she had declared. "I don't want any of these hand-me-down horrors. If you give me some spare change and ditto time, V. V., I'll buy a few yards of goods and make a dress I won't be ashamed of. Until then I'll just manage along with the shirt waists that have done me ever since I came home from school."

"Aw, come on, Angy—take an earful of reason," her uncle had begged. "I've sort of set my heart on seeing you diked out now, same time as me. Sam's stuff is just what the swells are wearing. He'll guarantee that, won't you, Sam? Remember that stopping at the Cleveland you got to yowl like a reg'lar Easterner. C'm'on, leave us pick you out something sporty, now!"

"Not on your two lives," she had declared. "I'm not a sport and not burning up with any unnatural desire to dress like one."

The dapper, shrewd, hand-rubbing merchant, who fortunately only half had grasped the aspersions on his stock in trade, had risen verbosely to its defense.

He'd fit Miss Lambert "neat as a diamond back's skin," he promised, and she could pick her own colors from the shades of the rainbow; he had each and all.

A spoken afterthought of her uncle had not helped to conquer the girl's unreasonable reluctance. "Don't mind the expense, gal alive," Lambert said. "I'd have to be getting you a few things soon, anyhow, on account them nuptials with friend Regal. Not a petticoat'll be wasted."

"As if you could petticoat a waist," she had snapped back. "Shows your old bach ignorance."

Only after *the* Mesquite Wells dressmaker had happened in for some basting thread and had agreed to perform any needed alterations on the spot or in its proximity had Angelica yielded—and then ungraciously. There was a white-spotted dimity dress, although too large and long for her, which she wouldn't mind wearing if it were hemmed up and its sleeves shortened so that it would conform with a picture she had seen in a fashion sheet.

And for a sash, although she would not think of wearing any of the stiff, plaid ribbons offered by Prior, a pretty one might be made by sewing together a couple of those Mexican waistbands which were in the window. As they had fringed ends and the dressmaker admitted that fringes were all the go,

Uncle V. V. had agreed in time to what he pronounced a "darn fool, come-high notion."

The subsequent process of pruning and fitting and sewing had consumed the rest of the afternoon. In the end, all of the operatives declared themselves highly pleased with the result, except the one most concerned. She had wanted a larger, simpler hat, and she'd wanted it burnt orange with yellow flowers, to match her sash instead of all red. And she knew that swells didn't wear white cotton stockings, no matter how sleazy. As for her new shoes, at least they were comfortable, even if not very narrow or high arched.

She felt better satisfied with what she carried concealed in a bundle than with more apparent effects. She positively longed to prepare for bed in her soft, pink-scalloped pajamas; looked forward with rapture to combing her hair next morning with her new white rubber comb, while becomingly wrapped in her rose-silk kimono.

Altogether, except for her suspicion that something crooked was on foot, Angelica would have hugely enjoyed the respite of being a paid-for guest at the Hotel Grover Cleveland. Once before, after Uncle V. V.'s clean-up on war beef, the old nickel-pincher had stood for a party; had taken herself and the four

punchers who had been longest in Arizomex employ on a trip to three California places of interest—San Diego, Los Angeles, and San Francisco. A wild time had been enjoyed by all—a silk-shirt orgy for the cowboys, a restricted shopping revel for herself, and a double-barreled dissipation for Lambert, in which he saw how pictures were made to move. He also bought half a carload of atrocious furniture for the ranch house.

That had been two and a half years before. Since then Angelica's pleasure had been in retrospect, taken out in washing and dusting and mending the once-new waists, now old. Not since her graduation from finishing school—rightly named in her case—had she been farther away from the ranch than the Wells.

However, on this evening, which otherwise would have been so gala, she could not erase from her mind that secret king-jack-queen conference which had forewarned her that the hotel spree had some ulterior motive and would be carried out under false pretenses. What they were up to—The Fox and he of the hirsute mask—she could not guess. Her conviction was strong, however, that all the Easterners who had the wherewithal would be made to pay, even though only half the party was of the usually paying sex.

An exchange of nods had served to mark this second meeting of East and West. But after dinner old Whitebush had escorted his new clothes out into the patio and put them to the test as social—hence business—assets.

He seemed to meet with surprising success. Angelica, keeping out of the way for fear of a rebuff, couldn't imagine what he had said or done to be so well received. In less than half an hour after he had insinuated himself into the group, he sent for her. It was characteristic of him that he chose as his messenger the handsome, dark Mr. Crozier, when he could just as easily have sent the blond Rackowe whom she had told him she preferred.

Angelica's first impulse was to refuse—to have nothing to do with whatever was under way. But she had a friendly feeling toward the party of aristocrats, especially toward the young lady whom she so whole-heartedly admired. They were strangers, too, and she had her full share of the inborn hospitality of the West. How better could she show cordiality than by trying to understand the stacking of the cards against them?

Anyhow, it was stuffy and lonely in the lobby where Angelica had stationed herself to await the result of her relative's plunge. And—well, there is no

use denying that Angelica felt something of the true girl's elation in the effect she made in her new apparel. She had worn the red hat down to dinner because better pleased than at first with its becomingness above her black curls and pale, piquant face. Its combination with the yellow sash just had happened, but was, as she had begun to realize, the very thing for her.

An impulse for adventure had been instilled within her by the appreciative glances thrown her way. She practiced several remarks and tried out her own eyes upon her responsive escort as they crossed to the group, where she was presented to the most gracious and graceful of chaperons.

"Mrs. Barnett," rumbled the veteran, after arising and bowing in at least two directions at once, "leave me interdooce you to my niece and adopted daughter, Miss Angelica Lambert."

On her best behavior, the girl murmured a pleased-to-meet-you and offered a brown, hard little hand which, after a moment's hesitation, the widow took and shook.

Then Lambert had to spoil everything. "She's a fitting filly to furnish chili sauce for life to any male, but she's spoken for, so don't put yourselves out none a-setting up to her," he advised with a grin

that began with Rackowe and ended meaningly with Crozier.

"My name is Colville, not Lambert," she spoke up for the benefit of any concerned. "Moreover, it's going to stay Colville until I change my present mind!"

Undoubtedly she had amused and interested the whole party, her uncle excepted. But he was headstrong from the wine of his success in the society of these people from another world. They had taken him for what he seemed to be—range lingo and all. Only in volume of voice had he made concession; that he had softened. Not until certain that he was persona grata had he risked sending for the girl. Now he tried to put her in her place.

"It's just one of Angy's little jokes to go back on her engagement in public. She's one of these here female ko-ketts, so look out for her, gents. In private howsomever, she minds me."

"In private," Angelica admitted with a stubborn upfling of her small chin, but with sincerely serious eyes, "it's safer to mind my dear Uncle V. V. But we're not in private now. My father's name was Colville, and, as it was good enough for him, I reckon it'll do for me until——"

"Until some one more persuasive than a relative ever can be talks the matter over with you, I sup-

pose," interrupted Crozier with a complimentary flourish.

"From your looks and spirit, my child," Mrs. Barnett offered, "I don't imagine you two will have long to quarrel over your family name; that is, if your Western men like to tame such as well as ours of the East."

"A rose by any other name——" The fragment came from Rackowe. He didn't finish, perhaps because Zena had smiled directly into his eyes.

"Moved to quote the classics, are you?" she asked him.

Angelica could not decide whether it was to punish Rackowe or to reward Crozier—perhaps it was both—that Miss Barnett next turned to the handsome chap.

"It would seem to be high time, Robert," Zena said, "that I took you to show me that moonrise."

If it was, the tall, sandy-haired one didn't seem to mind. Angelica was glad to notice that, for she, no more than any other self-respecting young lady, wouldn't have liked to be left with a reluctant swain.

Rackowe busied himself drawing up a chair for her. Then, when he had her seated in comfort, he threw himself on the patio floor and made a prop for his head with hands and elbows, not even glancing after the well-watched, departing pair.

"If you don't mind, Mr. Lambert, we'd like to hear more about the chances of ranching investment, wouldn't we, Leonora?"

The widow nodded. "Next to antineuritis waters, I am most interested in wise investments."

Angelica had heard the word "investment" before that day. In just what connection? "Other people's Quaker money to invest." That was what H. C. L. had said Rackowe was reported to have—"Quaker" money. So that was why she had been bedecked as never before and the strangers had found Uncle V. V. and his Palm Beach suit so altogether acceptable.

She turned an attentive ear to the panegyric under way, for old Whitebush needed no third invitation to open into a veritable oration upon the subject of cattle and sheep raising. Rich was the prospect picture he painted—as wealthy as it was wabbly on the legs of truth.

Of course, Lambert admitted, the tide at the moment was at ebb, but wasn't ebb tide always the investor's opportunity? Any one with capital just then could snap up herds and acres greatly below their real value, and reap almost incredible reward when the readjustment period came. He mentioned lower freight rates on stock, coöperative marketing which would stabilize prices, and a protective tariff that

would shut out foreign frozen meats, as factors which must soon rehabilitate the industry. He hadn't supposed that Easterners like them would be interested in the subject, but if they were, now was the time to buy, and he would so advise his very best friend.

Putting a curb on her usually unmanageable tongue that surprised even as it punished her, Angelica managed to contain her indignation. That her uncle should pile lie upon lie in advising strangers to buy when he was so desperate to sell was taking, she felt, an infamously unfair advantage. She began to understand more the value of that royal-flush hand for which The Fox, figuratively, had advised her uncle to draw. A jack was needed to fill, and this young man with Quaker money was the right card and color.

Aroused, Angelica leaned forward and invited the gaze of the lamb about to be fleeced. Certainly Rackowe's eyes were as blue and unsuspecting as any shearer could wish. He needed "mothering" if ever a greener did. Her heart swelled with the very feeling toward him of which Lambert had accused her. The friendliness of his upthrown smile emboldened her into a course of unusual initiative.

She leaned lower toward the Easterner and spoke

with much the same assured voice and much the same assured smile which Miss Barnett had used toward Crozier a few minutes before. "I'm tired of sitting around," she said. "I, too, like to see the moon. Really, the rise of our Arizona one is a worth-while show, and the rim of the range is the finest orchestra seat you could want. Suppose we go and have a look?"

She scarcely knew how it all happened, any more than from what source her courage had come. But Rackowe had proved gallant, even through the shock of his evident surprise; had pulled his tallness and lankness and blondness to his feet; had offered her his hand to help her rise; had tossed aside readily enough any interest he may have felt in the subject of ranch investments and sauntered off beside her as though welcoming the suggestion.

Although her uncle had given his niece one startled, glowering glance, he had offered no verbal objection —nothing except the half-teasing, wholly ominous warning: "I'd advise you—the both of you—to keep your eyes on the moon."

As if changing his mind about the draw, Lambert turned the whole of his attention to the queen.

CHAPTER VI

PLAYING WITH FATE

WITH the appearance of a monster American cheese, rich, yellow, and succulent, the full moon arises in Arizona certain nights of the month. It is, of course, the same old moon seen elsewhere—the one that starts with just a crescent shred of platinum, then quarters, halves, fulls, and waxes fractionally. But in the wondrous Southwest, where the stars hang so low in the heavens that many a swain has been known to stretch up really expectant hands to snatch one as a superbrilliant for *her* engagement ring, Luna does not hold herself aloof as usual. Only to the imagination of the heart-hungry wayfarer is the spectacle unsatisfying—what a cheese sandwich might be to a starving mortal if held just beyond his reach. For if ever one has loved a Phœbe or a John, one's heart throbs are revived.

Like unto a silver sea had become the range of Mesquite Land when Cecil Joseph Rackowe and Angelica Colville reached its rim and gazed out over

the metamorphosed expanse. Near, bare hills were shrouded, as if the skeletons of dead victims had been draped in spangled veiling by the ogres who had slain them and who might be, even then, lurking in the shadowed arroyos that lay between.

The granite framework of distant mountains formed a fantastic skyline over the billowy plain. A far-away herd was brought so near that the lowing of the cattle almost could be heard. Scattered palms stood out like silken umbrellas glistening from the rain they so seldom shed, or, to change the simile, like seaweed floating on the tide. Everywhere the sagebrush, which by day gives the prairie's face a lined look, had turned to shimmering ripples. And over all the vast outstanding scape hung a glow of almost celestial purity.

To the girl born and brought up to it, Arizona moonshine was a familiar but cherished sight. Her life long, except those all-too-few years spent at boarding school up in one of the San Francisco Bay towns, she had enjoyed its changes as one has time to do when the nearest picture show is twenty miles away and the phonograph has grown wheezy from overuse. The jewel of night had gained, rather than lost, its power to thrill her through familiarity.

Usually, as now, she stood in silent, emotional wonder at first sight of the phantasmagoric spectacle.

By common consent the two had stopped upon the near bank of a dry wash. Although the scene was more of a novelty to Rackowe and one which he seemed to appreciate, he looked his full, manlike, then brushed the moonbeams from his eyes and turned them upon the more tangible wonder sight seated beside him.

Rackowe had not been slow to notice the picture made by his companion—her hat off, her eager, lifted face gleaming like marble in the strong rays, a sort of halo shining round her curls.

As for Angelica, if she had strolled out into the open with any idea of indulging that mothering instinct of which her uncle had accused her at luncheon, she had delayed too long. Already she was too much under the spell of the Arizona moon to feel old or wise. She couldn't, somehow, remember the things she had meant to say; she didn't wish, really, to talk at all; she just sat and looked and then—unmistakably and deeply—sighed.

She was relieved when the stranger sighed, too. Sympathy, which before he had shown only in the contemplative gaze of his blue eyes—seemed to be one of his most attractive traits. After he sighed, he

didn't seem a stranger any more. And he appeared to feel the same way about her. Instead of waiting for her to mother him, he started to father her.

"You don't strike me as an extra happy young person," he ventured with a sidewise smile. "Sometimes it does one good to talk to outsiders."

"If they're the right outsiders," she qualified.

"But that's just what I am." Rackowe looked vaguely concerned that she should consider the possibility of his being anything else. "You see, I liked you right away. I knew you weren't the mere child the others thought you, and I sort of got the fact that you're in trouble. I downright enjoy helping people in trouble, even those I don't get as I do you. You'll excuse me if I seem too progressive, won't you, Miss—Miss Angel? And if there's anything I could do—that you'd trust me to do——"

Angelica was thrilled even more by the perception of his kind-heartedness than she had been by the benign look of the moon. Furthermore, she was ashamed of her tart suggestion. She decided to meet his overture as sincerely as he had offered it; she thanked Rackowe and assured him that she wasn't in any particular trouble—although he was right about her not being quite happy.

She was lonely, she told him; had been doubly so

ever since returning from school, where the chief thing she had learned was the joy of companionship. She never had had any at home since that morning eight long years before when her adored father—positively the loving and most lovable father that daughter ever lost—had ridden off into the Mexican hills that rose opposite their house and had not been seen or heard from since. Hope had died hard in her young breast—the hope that he wasn't dead, as everybody believed must be true, and that one glad day he would come back to her.

"You poor kid! You poor little, longing, lonesome kid!" Cecil Joseph Rackowe commented in a kind way, with just the right quality and degree of kindness. "I can see you, although I hate to, looking and looking with those big, haunted eyes of yours. I left a favorite dog out at a little place I have on Long Island once and went away for a long trip. He had brown eyes, big and loving. He—he died looking for me before I got back, Miss Colville. I—it nearly broke my——"

Angelica turned, surprised, when his voice broke. His head had dropped forward, and he looked utterly dejected.

Yielding to impulse, the girl acclaimed by her nearest relative as "peppery," did what she wouldn't

have believed herself capable of doing a moment since; she just slipped her small brown hand into his large white one and left it in his clasp through the rest of the tale of her "troubles."

She didn't get on at all with her uncle, she told him. Sometimes she actually hated V. V. And she was going to show that she trusted him—that is, Mr. Rackowe—who so recently had been a stranger, but wasn't now, by admitting that she suspected a whole lot of things about the Arizomex acres.

There was her relative's possession of the ranch itself, for one thing; his methods of keeping it stocked, for another. Most of all her reasons for hating him was his insistence that she marry his pardner neighbor, a younger man who had taken what she termed "a shine" to her. However, this rancher, so far as she knew, didn't know that her uncle was digging for him with the spurs—she'd say that for Regal.

Cecil Joseph couldn't find it in his heart to blame this young man at all, or so he interrupted to say with engaging earnestness.

Of course, she didn't either, Angelica conceded with unconscious naiveté, for she was in every way his superior! Regal Frosby, she informed Rackowe, had little education and no honesty. She

had every reason to refuse him and none to accept; so she availed herself to the full of the opportunity.

With Angelica's uncle it was different. He was her blood relation and had some good points. She *had* to accept him; had tried to like and trust him, but had about given up. In the first place, he even yet hated her father—and hate begot hate. And he never would give her any satisfaction about the little that had been learned as to the fate of him lost in Mexico. That alone proved that he couldn't really care for her. Didn't Mr. Cecil Joseph think so himself?

"I do surely—surely," Rackowe declared with a pally pressure of the vibrant palm within his own.

"I am glad," Angelica proceeded, "because, for your own sake, I want you to believe in me and not him."

"For my own sake, Miss Angel?"

To one born to the most pronounced loyalty the next admission came out with difficulty, but Rackowe heard:

"Yes, for yours and your friends. I don't feel I should tell you right out all I suspect, because as yet I only suspect and the suspicions have a way of changing. But I want you to beware of my Uncle V. V. Will you—will you promise me?"

"I will," he answered promptly enough, but his face twitched with humor as he lifted his unemployed hand and added: "I swear to beware of Uncle Victor Valentine!"

All in a flash Angelica felt disappointed and indignant. She snatched her hand from his and got to her feet. "Come," she said snappishly. "I'm tired of this."

"Where away shakest thou, little pepper pot?" He was laughing at her.

"Home—back to the hotel."

Already she had started. When he caught up with her she further enlightened him: "I never got confidential with a total stranger in my life before, and I never will again. It's a plumb tee-total loss, that's what it is."

"I hope there'll be no other stranger," he said. "One is quite enough."

"One is too many, Mr. Rackowe, if that one makes a joke of a well-meant effort to help him."

"I'm not making fun, Angel." He had his hand at her elbow now and was in step with her. "I'm just as much in earnest as you are. Look at me. Let your eyes believe if your ears refuse."

With the aid of the moon, in her brief glance up-

ward, she did see. He looked nice and serious again.

"I promised what you asked and turn about is fair play," he continued. "Will you promise me that you won't regret confiding in me?"

"I can't promise that because I may. Quién sabe?"

"Then promise that you'll try not to forget it—that you'll give me the benefit of every doubt."

"All right."

To Cecil Joseph Rackowe, the impressionable, there was a distinct charm in the girl's face and figure as, herself suddenly humorous, she stopped, in turn, to lift her free hand in the moonlight.

"I swear to beware of regrets!"

Then, just when they were friends once more, he again and in another way rather disappointed her.

CHAPTER VII

THAT SEVENTH SENSE

AS the moon gazers entered the path arched with flowering mesquite which gave most directly upon the hotel patio, they were startled by a serape-draped figure which scuttled like some great rabbit across their way. Like a specter it looked in the quarter light, but a specter in a hurry, to judge by the noise made through the assorted brush. Both had stopped short at the sight.

"What—what was that?" demanded Rackowe, an indubitable quaver in his voice.

Angelica got herself in hand the more quickly for his nervousness. "A Mex—some cholo returning to servants' quarters at the hotel," she answered curtly.

Unpleasantly vivid was her remembrance of the trembling of the hands which Rackowe had raised at her uncle's misunderstood command earlier in the day. That hidden nerve which she had claimed for the sandy-haired Easterner—where was it? Was he indeed aspen-hearted? She hoped not more sincerely

than she had that morning. Angelica was sure that the blond Easterner possessed at least a bump of curiosity—the desire for detail, whether or not afraid.

"But why does he skulk through the shrubbery, instead of following the path?" Rackowe wanted to know.

"Likely he's out unbeknown to the folks—the proprietor or his old woman. They're always on the sneak, the greasers. I've grown to have sort of an instinct against them. I never can get used to them, although at the ranch we have them all around—vaqueros for the cattle, women servants in the house, and an endless procession of poor begging at our gates."

Squaring his broad shoulders manfully, now that the danger which never had been was passed, Rackowe suggested that she take his arm and offered the same. After only a moment's hesitation Angelica complied, quite as though she'd been used to clinging to dressed-up young men's arms all her life.

And she liked the sensation; she really did find it a pleasant prop. In the rough places, as they went on toward the hotel garden, she even clung to his blue-serge sleeve in the experiment at dependency. It gave her a last, but lingering, thrill.

A light suddenly upflaring in a second-floor win-

dow drew their attention to one of the guest chambers. They saw Robert Crozier appear momentarily, lower the sash, and draw the shade. The same fear crossed both minds—that they had overstayed the proprieties. With one mind they hastened their steps.

The patio's wicker chairs were untenanted, but within the lobby Angelica and Rackowe were relieved to find the rest of the party, with the exception of Crozier. The adjournment had been made, it transpired, out of regard for Mrs. Barnett's condition, she being convinced that the ever-present night chill would be bad for neuritis.

Angelica realized, almost as soon as her eyes had become accustomed to the glare of interior electricity, that her uncle still was playing the queen, and playing to some effect, if one could judge by the widow's show of interest.

Her daughter sat well within hearing distance, but was so absorbed in the contents of some magazine that the older pair might well have been alone. For a moment Miss Barnett seemed unconscious of the return of the wanderers; when she did glance up, she spared them only the briefest of smiles before turning a page and resuming her reading.

The niece of her uncle had to admit that he looked exceedingly handsome in his new store clothes and the

semibarbering he had undergone, at H. C. L.'s suggestion. And he still was holding down the soft pedal upon his resonant voice. His eyes sparkled with animation as they rested upon the charming widow. Lambert seemed to be dilating upon the attractions of Arizomex and not sparing color.

He, too, took a moment before sparing the girl more than a glance. "Back so soon, Angy?" the ranchman asked at last with unwonted effusion. "Let us hope you weren't struck with more than moon shimmers?"

Zena Barnett glanced up quickly at Rackowe, who reddened—a habit which evidently he could not control. That she had heard the old rancher's remark made her absorption in the magazine seem somewhat of a pose.

"We weren't struck at all and didn't see anything worse than a ghost," Angelica offered, with an ease that surprised herself.

She did not wish to discuss the moonlight with her prosaic relative—or with anybody, in fact—lest the gossamer-textured memory of that sympathetic scene which it had inspired be destroyed. But she needn't have feared; Lambert was too absorbed in his own prospects to care about hers.

"I've just been telling Mrs. B. here," he volun-

teered, ignoring the lady's protest at being addressed by initial, which she could not know was something of a Southwest habit, "about the hot spring down to our ranch. It just might do her a sight of good."

"About our what?"

Before he caught her eye, Angelica put the question. She was answered without words, but there was no more mistaking the look focused upon her than there was disregarding its threat, meant for her alone. In a previous emergency she had flouted one something like it and by way of punishment narrowly had escaped the application of the running iron, in the use of which upon cattle she knew him to be an expert. Of course, she then had been much younger, but the memory of a horrid fear remained with her.

"Oh, yes," she murmured. "Guess I didn't hear what you were saying." Her wondering thoughts were on the next play to be given the queen.

She was perhaps even more amazed at the old rogue's effrontery in claiming to own a curative spring than she had been at his boosting of the live-stock investment game. As it happened, there was no spring at all at Arizomex—hot or cold—only a couple of

artesian wells with no ambition toward medicinal properties.

In a flash of thought she saw two of the leads which doubtless had been outlined by Livermore. Her uncle meant to sell the ranch to Rackowe's investors; perhaps aspired to marrying the widow himself. But what was the game cut out for the king, the handsome Crozier who had gone to his room early, possibly on account of some love quarrel with the beautiful Miss Barnett?

"That there spring is sure a wonder, Mrs. B.," Lambert continued to descant, evidently regarding his niece's return as a casual incident.

"And is it thrown in with the twenty-per-center of a ranch?" inquired Rackowe.

At his eager tone, the girl studied him. He looked interested, sincerely so. After all her hints was he such a boob that he'd believe all he was told? He didn't return her reminding glance. In fact, he seemed to have forgotten her presence. Well, she would give him a better chance to forget it, she suddenly decided; she would follow Crozier's example and retire from the scene. Let him get robbed if he wanted to—she had done her part.

With a word that she was tired, Angelica bade

them all good night and started up the winding staircase. He who so recently had sat in close, palm-to-palm palship with her under the moon rays rose lankily in order to make in her general direction the most perfunctory of bows. Miss Barnett nodded over her magazine.

It was Uncle Victor who remembered. "Hi, there, Angy, this ain't our ranch house! You've gotta ask that there clerk's permission to go to bed or you won't get no key."

She laughed at herself—she couldn't help it and no one else seemed moved to. The clerk brought the key to her halfway up the stairs. As she turned on the landing, she could see that her relative still held his hand. Just what way did he mean to play the king, since evidently he was inclined to take no chances, but back each card for all its possibilities?

To her mild surprise, she found the door of her room already unlocked, but put it down to carelessness and stepped inside. It is said that women born of the West and bred to its vicissitudes seem to have a seventh sense. It must have been this that told her in the act of groping for the electric punch button, of an alien presence.

Before she could flood the room with light,

strong fingers closed around her throat, but not so quickly or tightly as entirely to choke her scream. Was it loud enough to carry downstairs? She hoped so, for Angelica felt that she would not be allowed another. And if it did carry, who would be the first to respond to her desperate S O S?

CHAPTER VIII

THE FIGHTING SPIRIT

"FIGGER of a boy," was one of Uncle V. V. Lambert's favorite taunts for Angelica. But that same slender figure concealed muscles which any boy might have boasted. From babyhood the open range had been her unrestricted kindergarten. Her riding had been upon no hobbyhorse, but on this or that broncho until she was old enough advisedly to choose a regular mount, the night-black youngster she had christened "Somber."

The girl and colt had, as it were, grown up together in strength and agility and staying quality. So it was that the "figger of a boy" was not a bad sort for a young lady upon whom had been made a sudden and urgent need of man muscle.

That one scream was all allowed by her unexpected assailant. And, to do her justice, it was doubtless the only tribute to femininity which she would have paid, anyway. Although the fingers about her neck tightened, so from protective instinct did her throat

muscles. Instead of swooning, she was able to get a grip of her own upon the jugular of the unknown.

As nearly as human might, she understudied one of those cats of the Arizona wild which, when cornered, give creditable battle to many times their weight. And, sensing that any fist she might make with her slender fingers would avail little, she scratched with her free hand very like one of the cat family.

The next move of the man, a heavy blow, nearly accomplished its object of stunning her. But she managed to stand up under it; quickly rallied and pressed closer. The following blow she dodged sufficiently to throw its author somewhat off balance. Thus was she able to accomplish that which had flashed into her mind at the start of the struggle—its transference from the darkened room to the hall, where shone the lights of bracketed bulbs.

Even if her cry of alarm had not been heard or understood by those below, the sound of continued battle must arouse them. Exerting the last ounce of her strength in a precipitate rush, she carried herself and her adversary through the portal.

That he was a greaser whom she had surprised in the act of rifling her room had been an initial suspicion. The glow of the hall lamp confirmed this and

afforded the added detail that she had met this particular marauder before.

The recognition, it seemed, was mutual and not without effect upon the man, although it is probable that the sound of movement below had more to do with the release of his throat clutch. With an effort he thrust his catlike opponent from him to a crash against the wall and darted for the chamber door, his obvious intent to escape by the window and a one-story jump to the brush-grown ground.

However, Angelica's fighting blood was up. From the wall she rebounded as though her flesh were rubber; very like the wild cat mentioned, she sprang upon the back of her retreating enemy. "No, you don't, Scary Gonzales!" she cried.

And the bandit didn't. Although he might easily have carried Angelica's weight, clawing impediment though she had made of herself, her battle cry was echoed from below. Some one shouted and bounded up the stairs—some one who reached the scene before the Mexican got through the door.

Although there was no fire, doubtless from fear of harming Angelica rather than the real target, the butt of a gun was brought down most effectively upon Gonzales' head. Thrusting the girl behind him, the ready rescuer then forced the Mexican to his knees

at the point of the weapon—a point, she had pause to observe, that trembled both noticeably and dangerously.

Bounding up the stairs came the others from below. Lambert bellowing like a bull, the young clerk shrilling vociferously as to what the trouble was, the beautiful Miss Barnett trying to calm her agitated mother on the way. In shirt sleeves, from his room down the hall, also appeared Robert Crozier.

"You horned toad of a greaser!" roared Lambert on recognizing the culprit. "Just a minute—just you wait till I get my gun! Darn that Palm Beach suit! What made me lay it offen me for the first time in years!"

"You're welcome to mine if you really wish to use it."

The suggestion came from him who had been first on the scene. Angelica turned to see just who had performed the ready service. At first glance she was thrilled that it should be he—Rackowe. But the thrill soon subsided in wonder over why the gun point continued to shake. Rackowe looked anxious to be relieved of the unaccustomed weapon lest he do something wrong with it before it did something harmful to him. After his brave spurt up the stairs, the Easterner looked disillusioningly ineffectual.

"Give me the gun," ordered Crozier, quick to take advantage.

With a weakness remindful of the way his hands had shaken at Lambert's fake holdup and of his more recent shadow shivers in the path of arched mesquite, Rackowe gave over the automatic with which, in nick of time and without fire, he had conquered the desperado.

But all were startled by the handsome Easterner's next move. "Now, Gonzales, vamose while you've got the chance." Crozier's voice was low, but insistent. "The back stairs—as I told you before, you wretch!"

The Mexican scrambled to his feet—started.

"You're not going to let him go?" cried Angelica indignantly, as she sprang forward.

Crozier barred the way. "You don't want to go to court, do you? For your own sake it's best to let him——"

"But he nearly choked me to death; he would have finished me if he could. Let go my arm. I won't have him go free when——"

The bandit had not awaited the end of their altercation. By the time Rackowe, impelled by the girl's angry gesture, had set after him, he had gained the back stairs and taken a straight dash to freedom.

"No use following him. You couldn't manage him if you caught him," Angelica called after the willing young bungler, her earlier gratitude forgotten in rage and disappointment. Crozier she included in a look that punished. "You're a fine pair of fighters, I must say! After I nearly broke my back trying to hold him, you rush up and let him loose!"

"In a way I am responsible," Crozier began.

"You sure are," Angelica agreed pithily. "If it hadn't been for dressing up in this fool finery to meet you folks, I'd have had my own hardware on my hip and then——" She aimed a defiant, withering glance at her uncle, whose vociferousness seemed astonished into temporary quiet by the unexpectedness of the caught bandit's escape.

Then Angelica marched into the bedroom from which she had forced the fight and shut the door with a bang. She owed Rackowe better than she had given by way of thanks. She realized that she wasn't being exactly fair, but the young woman was unreasonably upset by the bad end to his good beginning. Rackowe's heroism had been so short-lived! She just couldn't help it.

The group left in the hall looked blankly at the slammed door, then more blankly at each other.

"What's it all about, anyway?" demanded Lambert.

"That there gal's my niece and if you pair of mollies have gone and let that greaser rob——"

"When I topped the stairs the Mexican was trying to get through the door, Miss Lambert holding him," interrupted Rackowe. "I didn't exactly like to fire—I've never been in the habit of killing human beings, you know—so I just whanged him with——"

From out the bedroom had burst Angelica, the electric glow of the lighted bulbs within streaming around her. "This isn't my room at all! Whose key did you give me?" She turned like an accusing fury on the young clerk. "I thought that the door seemed farther along the hall than before dinner, but I hadn't got the light on before that he-hyena——"

"Why, this is my room!" exclaimed Zena Barnett with the shrill of sudden discovery. "What is the number on your key tag, Miss Lambert?" They examined it. "Clerk, you must have given her my key."

"My mistake, ladies—my mistake, but no harm's done," murmured the incompetent. "Just give me one minute and I'll bring Miss Lambert's right key in a jiffy. Sorry if I've discommoded."

"Discommoded!" Angelica sent after him. "You'd say, if your muscles felt as strained as mine, that you had been just that—discommoded."

Crozier raised an appealing hand. "Won't you let me explain, Miss Lambert—Colville. As I started to say a moment since, I am in a way responsible for your fright."

"Why keep insisting?" Angelica demanded. "We're all agreed that you had your chance and bungled it—you, even worse than Mr. Rackowe, here. If you hadn't let that centipede slip away, I'd call this the end of a perfect evening."

"But you don't understand in just what way I am responsible," Crozier protested. "You see, Gonzales came here to-night to see me—to bring that piece of Aztec pottery I was trying to get for Mrs. Barnett.

"I was expecting him," Crozier went on, "but not through the office. I wanted to have my little surprise to-morrow morning. That is why I came early to my room. Gonzales arrived and I paid and dismissed him—thought he had left the hotel. He must have noticed that your room was unlocked, Zena, and couldn't resist the temptation. Through the clerk's mistake of keys, Miss Colville blundered in——"

"Oh, I blundered in, did I?" that spicy young person sniffed. "Seems to me you blundered out in letting him get away; at least, you have in my opinion. Who knows what the coyote might have stolen from Miss Barnett?"

The suggestion caused an armistice, while Zena made a hurried survey. She soon returned to them to declare that their brave little heroine evidently had arrived too soon for the bandit to lay hands on any of her things. But valuables, toilet articles, and clothes were scattered about the room.

"All's well that ends——" began Rackowe. But he did not finish the bromide. He seemed to have become tongue-tied under the look sent his way above a brown hand that was stroking a slender, presumably bruised throat.

"Something will end well if ever I meet that cholo when there are no alleged men around to interfere. You owe it to me to catch him again and lay him at my feet."

With this parting shot, the deprived victor literally snatched the key at the moment offered by the returned clerk, matched the number on its tag with that on a door some yards down the hall, and withdrew herself from their uncongenial midst.

Indeed, Angelica felt in no mood to witness the presentation to the widow of that Aztec water jar. No exhibition of its rarity and value as a ceramic prize would explain to her satisfaction the handsome Easterner's leniency to the Mexican whose finger

touch had—and indeed nearly fatally—"discommoded" her throat.

Crozier had tried to shield the bandit; or so Angelica supposed. Whatever the reason therefor, she hoped maliciously that her uncle would find it possible to play the king.

As for the sandy-haired prospect—the local banker's jack—he had started well, started well twice, as a matter of fact. But what a softy he had been to give over his gun! She had been right about there being *something* to him, or he never would have bolted first up the stairs and assured her personal safety.

However, Lambert also was right. Rackowe sure did need some raising, and by a Spartan mother. She had had success in undertaking many a backward dog and outlaw colt. She felt that she now owed a debt to this inconsistently timorous Philadelphian. Would he, she pondered, prove worthy of her expert efforts in his behalf?

CHAPTER IX

LOOKING FOR LIGHT

WELL along in the afternoon of the Monday following the departure of V. V. Lambert and his niece from the élite hostelry on the outskirts of Mesquite Wells, a horseman, superbly mounted, dashed into the yard of the Arizomex home ranch.

To the casual observer he might have been taken for a Mexican vaquero, togged out by grace of an unusual piece of luck at monte or more stressful gambling. Even more he looked to be an *administrador* intent on dressing the part of manager for some absentee patron. On the border this last title often stands for an American ranch owner who is satisfied with bank drafts and seldom visits his acres in person.

But Angelica Colville, waiting—although not for the one the rider turned out to be—behind the grass-reed screen of the nearest living-room window, suspected even before applying her eye to a crack, the identity of the arrival. One glance at the white stal-

lion with the black-starred face, whose hoof beats had aroused her, settled the point.

Regal Frosby, nearest neighbor, always came with a dash; always looked as though he had not been around for months; always alighted with a most spectacular spring from saddle, whether or not he was sure that he had a group looking on.

That he should have come at this particular hour, on this superparticular afternoon, after ten days of unaccustomed absence, aroused in the girl a feeling of indefinable exasperation; a feeling which she was at once on guard to conceal. With an unusual show of cordiality, therefore, she was at the front door of the low-built log ranch house before he was able to demand admission by rapping with the butt of his gun.

Any one who had overheard the young woman's heated denial of interest in this gallant suitor at a recent chop-suey tête-à-tête with her guardian, might have felt surprise at the warmth of the smile with which she greeted him. Of course, Regal was accounted easily the best-looking eligible in the league-wide region and bulked big with trimness that denied superfluous flesh.

There were few along the Border of Trouble who could ride as did Frosby or shoot as straight. And

his disposition was frequently mentioned as one not to be trifled with. But the renamed Miss Lambert was no more in awe of him or appreciative of his qualities than she was overfond of him.

Yet, this day of days, she smiled most seductively up into his bold-featured, rather swarthy, dark-eyed face when he had stamped up the steps to a stand before her.

"You're a surprise—as per usual, Al," she said as they strolled the generous length of the porch which looked out over the Mexican hills and, at this hour of the day, offered none of the cool, eventide comfort for which it was designed.

Angelica was the only person who ever had venturned to call him anything so insignificant as Al, but he was too used to what he called her "natural-born impudence" to notice her contraction of his rather royal-given name. No more did he notice the different quality of her smile.

Long since had he settled in his own mind that the winning of her would have to come *after* a certain ceremony, if at all; that the favor of his suit must come through him with legal right to give away the bride, rather than through the bride herself. Moreover, except in poker games, he was not keen to subtle changes of expression.

"Does Victor V. happen to be around?" he asked casually, as though he had not ridden ten miles through semitropic heat to learn.

Where, indeed, was Lambert? Angelica was wondering just that. He should have happened to be around by now—he and his party.

She did not answer immediately, except by shake of the head; rather, she busied herself getting the caller inside, where drawn blinds plus thick log walls afford a certain refrigeratorlike coolness, and ordering a pitcher of limeade from old Barbara, the Mexican widow, who ruled the kitchen kingdom.

In truth, she felt the need of a moment to ponder his question, since surely, despite the strenuous preparations of the past few days, her uncle must have found opportunity to acquaint his young partner and neighbor with the object of his driving the flivver into Mesquite Wells the previous afternoon. With hospitality attended, she answered with a question direct of her own.

"What's the bluff about, Al? Don't you know that he's invited a bunch of high-life folks to visit us and has gone to town to herd 'em out?"

At her call, Frosby vented the laugh which was the pleasantest thing about him—a joyous, inviting, frank ebullition of youth which she sometimes thought

might make existence with him possible if worse came to worst.

"That's right, this is the day of the host!" Then immediately, as often before, he had to spoil the good impression with a prevarication. "I'd plumb forgot this here was the afternoon he was to conduct out his string of suckers to the scene of the crime."

"You forgot nothing of the sort—why bother lying to me?" she inquired, although with unwonted mildness. "And what crime do you mean, Al—scene of what crime?"

"Aw, come now, lady love; don't play Yankee! I got my ask in first. Suppose you tell me just what the old man's up to?"

Angelica wished that she could tell him the whole story. Exactly why her tricky relative had urged the Easterners to an indefinite visit at the ranch, in certain of its aspects, was still more or less of a problem to her. For one, in whom the instinct of hospitality had long lain dormant, so suddenly to throw wide his gates, seemed more than the incipient scheme of The Fox would warrant.

After the incident with the scar-faced bandit on the upper floor of the resort hotel, their acquaintance had progressed rapidly with the Easterners. Doubtless much more rapidly than without the leveling in-

fluence upon the whole party of fright and excitement.

It had seemed natural enough when, the following evening, after an entire day of making himself agreeable, Lambert had voiced his invitation. Natural enough, until he had added his personal guarantee of the curative possibilities of that hot spring which she knew did not exist. To Angelica's consternation, they had accepted—all four of them—and with almost equal eagerness.

That the development had hatched from the ideas laid before her uncle by Banker Livermore, the girl felt reasonably certain. That she did not warn the proposed dupes was, to do her justice, more the part of policy than of fear. She could best help them by knowing more of the plot and of them. Besides, she wanted them to come. She was starved for companionship, and she did like most of them very much and—well, more than anything in her recent life, she wanted them to come.

Regarding Frosby, Angelica had the shrewd idea that he was more in old V. V.'s confidence than herself. Just where he hoped to get by pretending ignorance, she could not at the moment decide. But she'd just play along—play along and see.

"Are you seriously asking me what he's up to?"

she demanded. "I hoped you could tell me. He appeared positively to enjoy getting dressed up in Palm Beach clothes. They certainly did transform him there, at that. And, even to me, he didn't seem the same V. V. Lambert—the one we know—spending money on clothes for himself and for me for the first time since my graduation, and now continuing to spend regardless——"

"Regardless?" Frosby interrupted, a frown frightening away his smile.

"Oh, not a great deal—except for the present time, when all us cowmen are so darned hard up Betsy's been in for three loads of canned and bottled and boxed truck and a lot of groceries, so high-toned that they've got our cupboard thinking it has been adopted into this shack by mistake. Looks to me like the eats were going to be some toothsome on Arizomex for a week or two."

Frosby dismissed his frown. "I'll remember that," he said with a grin.

"What's moreover, said eats are going to be free," the girl went on, "which is one of the queer angles to it all. With a lordly wave of his hand he poohpoohed their offer to pay, although I must say they insisted as if they meant it. To have heard him snorting about the hospitality of the West, you'd have

thought war-beef prices was a fixture in the U. S. A. It's a fact that he hasn't bothered to pick up his change since he met them."

Not for a moment had she forgotten the investment dollars intrusted by Quaker relatives to Rackowe, but she had no intention of self-directing the attention of her likely-to-be-troublesome suitor to that somewhat incompetent pilgrim.

"I've been wondering, Angy," propounded the near neighbor, after he had emptied a glass of the "dust cutter" with which old Barbara had puttered in, "whether the weevil in the grainery is that there widdy he mentions rather prominent in his listing of the touries. What sort is she, anyhow?"

"The most lovely woman of her age I've ever met," declared Angelica without reservation.

"But ain't she rich, to boot?"

The girl glanced at him across the center table with annoyance. Why must he have the very same idea that had bothered her—the idea that her uncle would aspire to play the queen matrimonially? That this idea should occur promptly to Regal proved it well within the range of masculine presumption.

"Naturally the Barnetts have money or they wouldn't be loafing over the face of the globe for their health," Angelica admitted. "But it's plumb

ridiculous to think that she might get interested in a man like my uncle."

Frosby, again with his attractive laugh, declared that there was no telling about women. He pointed as significant the old man's evident intention of making a show of prosperity; told what Angelica had not yet heard, that her uncle had borrowed the Open and Shut's most likely herd of steers for the length of the Easterner's visit and had exiled to Frosby's his "bone showers" doomed to sacrifice unless rain came soon to freshen up feed on the open range. To use her own word, the veteran schemer had laid in scenery regardless.

"And what's all this about a hot spring for m'lady's rheumatic joints?" the young man demanded with the conclusive manner of an attorney who leaves his strongest argument to the last.

The laugh in which Angelica joined sounded the first genuine note, at least from her, of the interview. "Oh, the hot spring?" she cried, then hugged her knees and began to laugh all over again. When calmer, she suggested that she should not try to tell him about it, but that he come and see.

Retrieving her straw sombrero from the floor in the corner where it had been tossed like that of the careless boy whose life she lived, she led the way out

through the kitchen and across the yard to what had been a sheep fold in the days of her father, when ranching on Arizomex had been mixed. In use then had been a vat for dipping the "ba-bas." Into this the sheep had been driven, for it contained a lukewarm preparation that was death to all parasites of the range.

Lambert, on gaining control of the ranch, soon had tabooed sheep, but the vat with its equipment for heating the formula had remained for the reason that in this land of putting things off, no one ever had had the energy to remove it. Now it stood transformed, the center of a canopied house of palm leaves, its interior scrubbed until it shone like a Dutch kitchen, its connections newly piped to the neighboring artesian well.

"Sheep dip as treatment for a prospective bride!" yowled Frosby. "Sa-ay, nobody but Victor Valentine Lambert, Esquire, would ever think of that."

"He's a lot more serious about this, Al, than you seem to think," Angelica explained. "He never did believe in Mesquite Wells as a cure, and thinks this neuritis the widow is suffering from is nine tenths the disease of an idle imagination. He's boasted so much to her about this border cure that she's

coming with all the hope in the world—she and her daughter, too.

"He's arranged to run the water over some rusted iron and a heap of lump sulphur," the girl went on, "so that it will taste and smell like a mineral spring and—well, no joke, it may be good medicine, at that. Far be it from me to say it's less beneficial than Mesquite Wells. I've decided, at any rate, not to throw cold water on his hot. If Mrs. Barnett's imagination is strong enough, it just may cure her."

Frosby evidently approved this decision. After further examination of the new spring house, he opined that it might "get across" with an Easterner; he had heard that the members of this party were green as they grew. Yet the girl could see that he was not satisfied. Whatever he had come to learn in her uncle's absence was still unlearned.

CHAPTER X

VERY VOLCANIC

AS they turned back toward the house, Angelica by means of easy conversation contributed the hope that Regal Frosby would make himself available when it came to entertaining the visitors and expanded somewhat on the beauty of Miss Barnett. She did not, however, seem to distract or interest him.

"Ain't you beauty enough for me, you little snap turtle? Why get all out of breath bragging up a lady I don't care if I never see?" The questions were not so ardent as they may read; evidently Frosby was thinking about something else.

Off to one side of the house, Angelica showed the ranchman her uncle's second innovation. In the branches of a live oak, which marked the exact international boundary—if one could believe the rock monument officially placed alongside—a platform had been erected with an overflung awning and easy access afforded by a rustic ladder.

"A sky parlor for the pressing of his love suit?" Frosby hazarded a guess.

"Wrong the first time. We're short of guest rooms, never having had the need of many. Uncle devised this up-in-the-air sleeping porch where one of the strangers will bunk."

"One of the strangers, Angy? You mean a man?" Frosby showed his first surprise. "The old boy only mentioned ladies to me. What's he gone and done —invited a regiment down on you?"

"Not a regular regiment, but a host sure enough."

In her answer Angelica realized that at last she was supplying the information for which her suitor had come. The crux of their interview was here.

"And just how many," he asked stiffly, "might that there host be?"

"Let's see," she began vaguely, never unwilling to torment him. "There's the Mrs. Barnett already specified, the mother with the mental rheumatics. Then there's the daughter. And believe me, friend Al, if you never were rewarded proper after looking at a lady, you'll be rewarded at last when you glimpse her. Even if she doesn't notice you at all——"

"She'll notice me, all right, if I want her to," he blustered. "But you go on now. The old man wouldn't get down to cases about just who——"

This time, however, as well as in most of their past acquaintance, Angelica refused to get down to cases. The explosive cough of the flivver supported her. Over the trail they could see the rattlebox approaching, filled to the brim with baggage and followed closely by a seven-passenger car, evidently hired at the Wells.

They were here—her new and wonderful friends! After having expected them the whole afternoon, Angelica felt suddenly quite unprepared. She wished she had put on her new dimity instead of her old white graduating dress. Her heart began to hammer with an agitation connected somehow with thought of the two men guests—yet not connected with Frosby's reception of them.

Angelica looked about her. Near by, in the cacti border of her flower garden, bloomed a scarlet bisnaga. Regardless of prickles, she stooped, pulled it from the armored plant, and fastened it into the lately acquired black velvet ribbon that bound her curls. Then she darted toward the house that she might gain the front porch and her position as hostess by the time the four guests alighted.

Regal Frosby, furiously frowning, followed her more slowly. And his frown, in turn, had followed the trend of his thoughts. What he wanted to know

was why that old curmudgeon, V. V. Lambert, had been unwilling to acknowledge the truth that the two men greeners were to be guests at Arizomex Ranch, as well as the women.

There could be only one reason—that Lambert had some scheme which he wished to conceal from his near neighbor. And what could such a plot be, in all circumstances, except something that concerned Angelica? All right; if the uncle was learning tricks from his minx of a niece, he'd have something to learn from his pardner, too!

Out in the front yard an animated reunion was taking place. Angelica had relinquished her stand on the steps as entirely too formal for the happy occasion. The others were all so easy, so gay, so cordial —even Victor Valentine Lambert, who was bellowing his orders about the baggage and cars in most nonchalant style—that Angelica yielded to the mood of the moment.

She returned warm-heartedly the embrace of Miss Barnett, cool and sweet in gray linen and a violet turban, and of Mrs. Barnett, extra smart in striped black and white and a sport hat. She allowed her unaccustomed hand to be squeezed by Rackowe and held for an extra moment by the handsome Crozier;

Angelica laughed over nothing as lightly as they did.

Before they reached the porch, Lambert had hailed Regal Frosby, an isolated figure in the shadow of the porch, and had introduced him with a flourish to each of his guests in turn. If the owner of the Arizomex Ranch was surprised at the neighbor's uninvited attendance on the home-coming, his manner did not show it.

Angelica, with a dozen things to ask and answer and dozens more to apologize for and explain, had no attention to spare for shades of effect. She remembered afterward that Frosby had fallen in beside Zena Barnett. Angelica led the way with her right hand on the matron's arm, the ranch girl herself being assisted up the steps by Cecil Joseph Rackowe. Lambert and Robert Crozier, both bearing hand baggage, followed in the wake.

Angelica realized a certain sort of relief that it was Rackowe beside her—a relief linking a thought each of the irony of fate, the mischance of an ardent swain and the luck of a girl usually luckless. Also, the young woman thought of her ardent suitor.

Later, at the supper to which Frosby had not needed any especially urgent invitation, she recalled that this feeling was somewhat superfluous. For once

he was on his good behavior. He didn't appear to be jealous; in fact, wasn't noticing her or her possible flirtations at all. Slowly she awoke to a startling fact —Regal Frosby, her exclusive property since early childhood, was what the range would have called "struck of a heap" by the beautiful city girl.

There couldn't be any doubt of it; already the rest had noticed and were making teasing comment. Frosby's eyes were on Zena all the time; delighting in her face, her dainty dress, her soft knot of hair. His attack was now characteristically bold, now timid and flushed from her amused repulse.

It was when a general laugh had burst forth at his expense, aroused by the old host's bellowed suggestion that he should not spill all the beans being passed upon the tablecloth, that Frosby sprang to his feet angrily. He pulled out his huge silver watch, declared that he'd forgotten another and quite important engagement, and that he must go at once.

Despite general protest, the neighboring ranchman persisted in his apparent fit of pique as far as the door. There, however, he regretted it sufficiently to pause and address them. "Have you plumb forgotten, pardner, that to-morrow is the angel kid's birthday?" he demanded.

"By gum, it is that!" exclaimed Lambert tragically.

"I'd intended my present to be something different, Angy, soon as I could get to town. But how'd you like it to be a ball over to my poor but respectable 'dobe to-morrow night—something that you could ask your swell friends to and all enjoy?"

"Oh, Regal, would you?" Truly delighted for sake of the pleasure it would help her to give others, as well as any craving of her own, Angelica skipped over to Frosby and seized his hands. In fact, she tried to give him a grateful hug, but something prevented.

"Look out, girl!" Deliberately Frosby got out of her grasp. "Just because it's going to be your birthday, don't act as if everything connected with the party was yours. You save your hands and elbows for some sandy cuss." He turned again to those at table. "All set, then, for eight o'clock to-morrow night, folks? *Buenos dias!*"

He was gone. His last look had been for Zena. He—Regal Frosby—had warned Angelica away, and right before Rackowe. At times in her past career Angelica Peppery Colville had felt the sensation of sudden rage, but this was volcanic—an eruption.

CHAPTER XI

THE DESERT FLOWER

BY more persons than her admiring maternal parent—the one who naturally had the best right to believe in her—Zena Barnett was considered a remarkable young woman. Perhaps some idea of her superiority over narrower representatives of the sex feline can be given in the detail of what she afterward referred to as a "preparedness session" with the younger of her hosts on Rancho Arizomex.

The time of this little byplay was late afternoon of the day of Regal Frosby's ball. The setting was in the largest of the bedrooms of the all-on-one-floor log ranch house; a chamber made dainty as any visiting lady from sophisticated parts could wish by the triumph of some one's inspired good taste over ugliness.

What had been a cheap and hideous suite of varnished oak had been sand papered and painted with many coats of cream white. The rough plaster of the walls had been painted a light gray-blue. The two windows were hung with cotton curtains, mended in places and coarse, but evenly dipped in bluing of

a strong, cheerful shade. The bed and bureau wore a ruffled garb of this same material, and a rag rug of blending and contrasting colors glorified the floor.

The dramatis personæ are the appreciative guest occupant and her hostess. Evidently both were just in from a ride, to judge by the smartly cut pongee riding togs of the one and the faded corduroy costume of the latter.

"Do you know," Zena began, "I like you, Miss Pepper Pot."

"I didn't know it," Angelica answered, with a quick, shrewd glance at the beautiful, flushed, serious face of the girl she wished to be her friend. "But if you really do, I'm mighty glad. Naturally, I guess, I like you."

The girl, born to every advantage, tossed her crop, gloves, coat, hat, and herself onto the bed and waved into the one rocker the other, born to little or none.

"And what's more—a whole lot more—I admire you," continued the Philadelphian.

"Oh, oh! You do?" Angelica hesitated only a moment before the honest demand: *"Why?"*

"My dear, for assorted reasons! Because you're hot-tempered and you're not; because you both are and aren't the chili sauce your uncle calls you; because you're mean as they make 'em to those that

deserve it and kind as they come to the decent sort; because you're just the most piquant and unexpected and altogether interesting little imp I ever met; and because—oh, I might as well acknowledge it, even if I am green with jealousy—you're the prettiest wild flower I ever hope to see."

Angelica stared at her a weighing moment. "You jealous? I pretty? I did hope, Miss Barnett, that you weren't making fun. One truth my uncle has brought me up to understand is that I'm only about as good looking as the average boy. 'Boy Figger'—that's his meanest name for me."

"'Boy Figger' isn't a mean name, if he only knew it. It's a compliment that every latter-day sylph athletes herself to continue to deserve. And you promised me on our ride, didn't you, not to call me Miss Barnett any more?"

"Dear Zena!" murmured little Angelica, thus caught and convinced of possessing one of those attributes claimed for her by her relative—of being no "spit cat," no "ounce of paprika," no "she taranteler."

"You're just a plucky kid that's had to defend herself all her life against bullies bigger and stronger than she," continued Miss Barnett, with no especial sentiment in voice or manner; rather, as if merely stating a commonplace fact. "Of course, you've learned how to fight back—you've had to. But you'd

rather not. You'd really rather love your enemies, if you dared, than hate them. And you'd a whole lot rather be loved than hated or even feared. Come on, Angel, wouldn't you now?"

Zena did not insist upon verbal answer, as the subject under discussion appeared disinclined—or too abashed—to make admissions. She seemed, however, to take silence for assent.

"There are a couple of things I'd like to tell you which you are too young or too inexperienced or too modest to have discovered for yourself," Zena went on briskly. "In the first place, the way to gain the love of such of your own sex as have love to spare for another woman, is to be just what you are; and the way to get the love of what your uncle calls the 'he-male sect' is to be dressed to advantage."

"Don't you suppose I know that?" The old bitterness sounded in Angelica's retort. "I'm not so old that I'm blind to the way Regal Frosby ogled you and your lovely dress last evening, when he's never noticed anybody but me since I started growing up. But what's the difference, even if it is true? I can't be dressed, as you say, to advantage beside you. If I lose what's been offered to me as love on that account, likely it ain't such a loss."

Zena laughed, but not unkindly. "But there's no need for you to lose it. You can be dressed to ad-

vantage beside me. What, for instance, do you think you'll wear to your birthday ball to-night?"

"What do I think I'll wear?" With a recognizable pantomime of a languid lady trying to make a taxing selection, Angelica pressed one finger tip to her cheek and crinkled her brow. "This habit is, don't you know, just a bit passé. And my other shirtwaist is torn. Even my bungalow kitchen apron is slightly out of commission where I spotted it with *con carne* this noon. Re-ally, I rawther think I'll wear my dimity, with the yellow sash. Perhaps you've noticed the thing, as I've worn it every evening since we've met?"

"You're a cheerful child, that's what you are!" Zena patted her shoulder approvingly, as, rising suddenly, she crossed to and opened up her wardrobe trunk. "I wanted to show you what I'm going to wear. Look; how do you think your Regal will like this?"

On its hook holder the Eastern beauty held up a dress built of shell-pink crêpe, one of those floaty, untrimmed, inimitable creations, which she and her mother were constantly donning and which would have been the despair of the ranch waif had she not determined long since upon a policy of impersonal appreciation.

"It is just—just like you and that's something

to say!" Angelica exclaimed, with a smile the brightness of which was dimmed only by the faintest sigh.

A shimmering something else Zena flashed out of a drawer in the wardrobe. "And this," she added, "is what I'd like you to wear. You see, I don't want to be the only woman in the party dressed up, even if I have some place to go. I've been taught never to overdress my hostess, and I do want to wear that georgette. As you're the pace setter tonight, being the birthday kid, why not let me doll you up *ad libitum?*"

Not grasping *ad libitum,* evidently suspecting that it was strange Spanish for something else again, Angelica flared. "You think I'm scared of losing Regal, don't you? You think I can't hold my own with you? Well, I can't, and I know it? But what you don't know is that I don't care a lizard's discarded tail whether Regal sticks or not. I wouldn't want to win a man on borrowed clothes, thanking you just the same."

"Of course you wouldn't and of course you don't —and all the rest of the of courses! Don't try to blind me with your red pepper!" Zena laughed again and in the very face of her new friend's rage. "But it's a principle with me that if there is any turning down to come in an affair with a pair, the down turn should be the woman's."

"That ain't a bad principle," Angelica calmed sufficiently to snap, "providing it's the woman's turn."

"But it always is the woman's turn, Angel, if she's dressed to advantage. Come! Let's not have any false pride about this. You'll have a better time if I don't outshine you to-night; and I shall have a better time if I wear this pink dress. I want to wear it because Mr. Crozier likes me in it and particularly requested——"

"Thought it was Rackowe you dressed for," interrupted the ranch girl, with one of her black-eyed, shrewd glances.

Miss Barnett met this imperturbably. "Oh, did you, really?" she asked, as if sincere in her surprise. "So, you see, my request is not really for your sake, but my own. Since you've caught me, I put it as a personal favor."

For a moment she waited.

And for the same space of time Angelica considered her as well as the question. Then she walked across to one of the windows and, with eyes tight shut, reconsidered. When she turned back to this rare creature who seemed to be offering friendship, all the resentment had burned out of her eyes. They were more like those of a doe than the tiger kitten to which she so often was likened. And certainly there

was no feel of claws in the hard little hands that lifted the city girl's chin for a long, loving look.

"It's a personal favor, but for my sake," she said, showing understanding beyond her years and experience. "I've been so uppitish, you make me plumb ashamed."

Zena threw out a deprecatory hand.

"You sure are kind to want to help me hold my beau against his natural admiration of you," Angelica went on, regardless. "No matter whether I want to hold him or not, your way—that principle of yours—makes a sight better game than playing to lose. It was born in me to want to win. I'd like to have a real good time—once—as much as any girl. I ain't had many of 'em. And I downright worship the kind of clothes you wear," Angelica went on. "Who wouldn't? I don't see how you can have a thing that would fit me, you're so much taller; but if you have and want to fix me up more like a lady, why—I——"

"Angel!" Zena exclaimed, to cover the poor child's falter of pride. "Look—will you look at this?" She shook out the long, shimmery thing.

"But that's no dress; it's more like—it is a shawl!"

"A fine-sequined immense silver shawl that was brought me from the Orient. But it will be a dress

when I get through draping you to-night, never fear —a dress that will make you look as you never looked before."

By way of confirmation she held it against the white and black of the Western girl's coloring, studying the white of her skin, the black of her hair and eyes.

"Of course," Zena hurried to press the advantage gained, "none of my dresses would fit you, but this real lace slip will—with a tuck. As for slippers, I have a silver pair that's too tight for me. I've carried them clear to Arizona to find some one to give them to. After we've stuffed up the toes with cotton, you see, we can tie them on around the ankles with ribbon. And I have a bandeau of small platinum stars that I wore once in a tableau. That is, I hope I have it along. It never was becoming to my medium style of beauty, but with a dark type like yours it will look wonderful."

Literally from top to toe, Zena Barnett planned the ranch girl into an "effect"—Zena, who was rightly considered by many more than her mother as a rather unusual young woman. And Angelica, no longer reluctant, showed herself delighted to the heart with each suggestion. Then both young women set to work on the pleasant task of altering Zena's shawl into a dress for Angelica.

CHAPTER XII

DANCING CARMELITA

SOME feminine conspiracy, the object of which was to the males a deep and dark secret, was responsible for the fact that Lambert and his two men guests drove over to the neighboring ranch that evening in the flivver. The three women were to come as much later as they saw fit in the hired car, which Robert Crozier—always careless of expense—had insisted on retaining at Arizomex in the event of their desiring to take any long excursions.

While the handsome New Yorker refrained, as a point of courtesy, from expressing any disdain of the tin wagon, it was evident that he did not trust "Betsy." With half an invitation from Zena or Mrs. Barnett he would have made the trip along the border in the larger, swifter car that was to come.

As they clattered up to the Hacienda Open and Shut, there remained enough of the waning light for them to see its picturesque structure. Although entirely on the American side of the line, it was more

sketchily Mexican than the more improved ranch home of Lambert. So almost entirely were its twin houses and flanking corrals of adobe construction that scarcely a timber showed from the outside.

Flat and squatty was the architecture of both, the smaller, vermilion-colored one being the house of the owner; the larger, painted sky-blue, the joint habitation of vaqueros, their families, their amigos, and their horses, to say nothing of many little brown pigs, a virtual litter of dogs, and flocks of the chicken family, many of these last being gamecocks.

In the open doorway of the vermilion house, which alone of all on the ranch boasted windows, Regal Frosby awaited his guests. His disappointment at seeing only men aboard the flivver did not have time for expression.

Before alighting, Lambert bellowed the explanation that the dames were up to tricks, but would be sloping along presently in the larger car. There was no need at all, so he assured their host, for holding back the festivities, in apparent impatience for which the Mexican contingent was standing around in groups.

To Crozier and Rackowe the scene commanded immediate interest, not the least of which was presented in the person of the host who, while still retaining the heavy leather chaparajos which he fancied

for week-day and Sunday wear, had resurrected a boiled shirt from some past civilized ceremony and decorated it with a flaring tie that outcolored anything worn by his employees or their *café-au-lait* guests.

With the air of one sure of the propriety of his attire, he led the way into a low-ceilinged, oblong room which, except for benches against its wall and a group of chairs at one end for the band, had been cleared for dancing.

Here, as host, Frosby, formally opened the ball by lighting the first candle. Almost at once other yellowish flickers appeared about the room. The orchestra filed in with their instruments—a small harp of Spanish type, a fiddle, a guitar, and a long, unnamable reed piece.

The musicians all were past middle age, a life-weary lot who looked as if they might have taken up fiddling for the sole and simple reason that their dancing days were done. For several minutes after arranging their chairs they busied themselves finding a somewhat common key. Then, at a signal from Frosby, the orchestra began to emit music that best may be described as dancy.

Instantly the room was astir. The vaqueros selected their partners and went to it with a will, evi-

dently finding the dirt floor no handicap, hardened as it was by the feet of half a century. Shouting, screaming, and laughing began; the air swirled; dust arose. Angelica Colville Lambert's birthday *baile* was on.

Into his personal quarters Frosby conducted his male guests. "Best strip off them coats, gents," he suggested. "We're a-going to have a reg'lar *dolce-far-niente* night of it in honor of Lambert's kid. You'll likely find yourselves warming up 'fore long. Best grab off some comfort—it's your privilege."

As Lambert lost no time in seconding this defiance of conventionality, the two Easterners followed this advice. At least they did not display giddy bulldog suspenders, as did the other two, and their belt buckles were monogrammed.

The young ranchman further proposed: "What say, gents, to a sorta preparatory birthday toast afore the girls come, just to limber up our tongues? I've got a little mulberry juice here what's guaranteed to carry not more than one half of one per cent of any kind of poison."

An undertone in Spanish brought action to an aged serving woman, who, until that moment, had sat so immovably by the edge of the dead fireplace, as to seem a piece of furniture. Straightway she

dropped her yellow *rebozo* from head to shoulders and, shuffling flat-footedly around, set forth glasses and an earthen jar. Frosby poured liberally.

"To our angel that oftener ain't one!" he proposed with his genial laugh, his glass held high.

"To my family pepper pot!" agreed Lambert.

"Long life and strength to the spice thereof," added Robert Crozier, who seemed in an unusually good humor over something.

The sensitive lips of Cecil Joseph Rackowe moved. In a murmur too low to be overheard properly by the three others he contributed: "Full friendship for my little friend!"

Frosby, with glass to lips, stared at him suspiciously a moment, then tossed off the toast.

The first glance showed that the natives were making the most of the really inspiriting strains rendered by the sorry-looking musicians. Many of the younger women were most effective—a few of striking beauty. Even the older ones had not lost a certain grace common to all of Latin blood. And the straight-limbed vaqueros, it seemed, could dance as well as they rode.

Regal Frosby evidently was a popular patron, to judge by the repeated, urgent demands for his par-

ticipation. He turned hospitably to Rackowe. "You first; take your pick," he proposed.

The Philadelphian, however, shook his blond mane. "I'll wait," he said. "I promised one of our own party to dance first with her."

"Oh, you did, eh? Which one?" Frosby's suspicious glare put the double demand, although he did not speak.

With a sort of snort, like that of a suddenly reined cayuse, he turned to Crozier; literally flung him into the arms of an Amazonian belle; himself lifted a no less willing señorita from a partner who was growing winded. Lambert and Rackowe backed up against the wall as the only onlookers.

During the intermission the men adjourned as one to a near-by buffet, to fuel up, as Lambert explained. The more-or-less swarthy fair ones took opportunity openly to lay on fresh coats of rice powder without leaving the room.

Again the orchestra played and during this number Rackowe sat alone on one of the side benches, as even the veteran rancher had become enticed into dancing by the fan flirtation of a rather stout señora. Both he and Crozier disappeared completely during the next intermission, outside either for drinks or air, and missed the solo performance of a particularly

sinuous brunette who was doing some special steps. Rackowe, from watching the lithe, young creature, looked up to find Frosby again beside him.

"Has Carmelita caught your eye at last?" he asked.

Without waiting for an answer, he signaled the dancer, who tripped and swirled up to them obediently.

"Here's a nice little Epworth League boy who's broke away from teacher and wants to celebrate by having the next with you," the young ranchman introduced. "Carmel, I'll have you know, is the prettiest filly on all the range, amigo. Fling your string on her and try a Mexican lope."

At a peremptory wave of Frosby's hand, the musicians started up a swinging waltz, and the girl literally threw herself into the blond stranger's arms. Not only was it the patron's wish, but to her whose suitors all were dark skinned, he supplied a welcome variety.

There seemed no resisting the shove with which the big host sent them into the center of the floor. Besides, Rackowe had no wish to play the churl. The vivid-looking native Terpsichore and the music moved him; he was extremely fond of dancing. At once their steps seemed to suit, and as one, they were off in a spontaneous whirl.

Had Rackowe not been so interested in watching Carmelita in the first place, he would have noticed the chug of a motor outside. But he hadn't; that is, not consciously.

Thus it fell out that the two girls, Frosby's star guests, stood in the doorway and witnessed with keen disappointment the defection of him in whom both were interested. When that queen of Eastern ballrooms, Zena Barnett, condescended to ask an admirer for a first dance, she at least expected him to save the same.

As for Angelica, all through the Cinderellalike transformation of her boyish little self into the vision of beauty which had stared back at her from the mirror and stared again, her one most pleasurable anticipation had been of the amazement on Rackowe's face when first his eyes should fall upon her. And now that she was in the act of making her dramatic entrance, he was not looking, not thinking of her; not even suspecting that she had arrived!

She, with the exquisite mother and daughter, well surrounded by their guard of honor composed of Frosby, Crozier, and Lambert, had made a third round of the room before Rackowe brought up panting with the prize *cholo* beauty in his arms and faced

the consequences of his lapse. Alas, for the Philadelphian, these were considerable!

Rackowe's unwitting partner in crime, the young Mexican girl, took one look at the severe expression on the faces of the American ladies, muttered something in broken English about having lost her slipper heel, and basely deserted him. Mrs. Barnett raised her bediamonded lorgnette and glanced Rackowe up and down, as though he were some curious specimen noticed for the first time. Zena did not so much as look his way, being busy returning the tender gaze of Robert Crozier; and Angelica was preening her glittering plumage before the suitor who, after his first few astonished glances of comparison between her and the Barnetts, had flared into the full fire of his former ardor.

With only Lambert open to conversational overtures, Rackowe settled one thing in his mind—Frosby had planned that he should be disporting with the inspired Carmelita on the arrival of the party; he had been the dupe in a well-planned, successfully executed little plot. He made out a mental promissory note of payment for a high-handed trick due with as little grace as possible to the evening's host.

Rackowe's conclusion second in importance concerned his hostess of the week. Angelica was a

beauty, effective as a white yucca against a darkening sky. She looked grown up, different, luring beyond his previous concept of her.

Her black curls were piled high like a crown above her serene brown and stemlike, rounded neck, held in place by a filet of silver stars. Her gown revealed and concealed her graceful lines—a shimmering suggestion of something in which Rackowe had seen her clothed before.

What was the suggestion? Certainly never had he beheld her dressed that way. The half memory continued to tease him as he stepped near one of the doorways, unnoticed by the party so all-at-once oblivious of his existence. He wanted to get the long-distance effect of the odd and interesting ranch girl. Then he remembered. It was the light of the moon that had clothed her that other time with a similar shimmering effect, when they two had sat hand in hand; his moonlight maid and he at the hotel.

The mind which had conceived the magic change of to-night, of course, had been Zena's. But with what purpose? Zena was kind and generous. Probably the change had been made on account of the unwelcome admiration paid herself last evening by the Angel's dashing range swain. Beyond all doubt Zena wished to rid herself of Frosby's attentions. Would

she have hesitated had she known how strangely the yucca girl had stirred the feelings of one she had considered her own property since childhood—in short, of Rackowe himself?

There was no doubting the success of the experiment. Angelica, remarkably appealing in her frontier-town dimity, and even in her faded khaki and mended waists, was a creature to dream about in her newest costume, with her light-lifting, ankle-bound slippers, her slim, strong outlines, her lips quivering with shy smiles, her great, revealing eyes and queenly crown.

Rackowe resented the way her host had taken possession of Zena as if he had the right—this unkingly Regal who lived in such uncouth style. Yet Frosby had been clever and Rackowe the fool. Frosby had managed so that the two other men of the party, Crozier and old Whitebush, could enjoy their fling with the natives before the arrival of the American women. On being told that his third man guest was saving that first dance, the ranchman host had gone outside to await the approach of the second car; he had timed carefully the temptation of the sinuous Carmelita.

However, as Cecil Joseph Rackowe hopefully reminded himself, the evening as yet was young. He might look a dupe at the present moment, but to

know was to be prepared. At least he had more knowledge than a half hour since. He understood certain things about himself as related to a certain transformed little birthday girl; also as related to the first man he ever had labeled in his thoughts as rival.

CHAPTER XIII

CLINGING IVY

WHEN three exceedingly attractive women undertake to punish the same poor male for the same social breach at the same time—the Mexican element no longer figuring in the affairs of Frosby's star guests—it is likely to go rather hard on the male.

Of no help to the unfortunate victim of circumstances beyond his control was it that the other white men of the party had sinned the same identical vaquero-girl sin. He alone had been caught in the act and wasn't the kind to plead any defense at another's expense.

Although neither of his lifetime friends, the Barnetts, spoke one word of accusation, he was painfully conscious of the scourge of their glances. He knew that their resentment was on the increase rather than decrease, right up to the moment when they adjourned to Frosby's own quarters and the crux of the Angel's ball—a supper set for their party alone.

At one moment so subdued, at another so ironically amused did Rackowe feel that he tried to assume a grateful manner over being allowed to be among those present at all. They might indeed have voted him out with the natives, who had their own feast.

For his own chastisement, he tried to imagine Zena's feelings on entering the tallow-lighted room to find the young man whom she had been brought up to expect to marry, disporting himself with a rather wildly attired *cholo* belle. Zena was as strange to the country as he. Besides, she had asked him for the first dance, probably with some special design for punishing Crozier. Indeed, he must have looked utterly unappreciative, swaying around in the close-clinging arms of that coffee-and-cream maiden. Undoubtedly his townswoman had every claim upon an outward appearance of devotion on his part, and he really was grieved to have failed her.

However, there was this dazzling revelation of a ranch girl. Why must she keep upsetting his evening by her encouragement of the burly Regal brute, keep sprinkling it with paprika of smiles for other men? She, at least, ought to know that it was quite *au fait* for white guests to dance at least once with the help, since always they were included in any ranch affair, from weddings to funerals. Her own uncle had been

on the floor, as she must have suspected, and she wasn't ignoring him.

Angelica had been tired both times he had asked her for a dance, although she did not look tired and afterward had decided that she wasn't at all—but for benefit of another partner. Was it her quixotic idea to be loyal to Zena at his expense; to resent his slight to her friend? She seemed to be such a fair and square little angel kid, she must have some good reason.

Rackowe had one good habit, an extra-good one—that of refusing to become depressed over outside influences. When inclined to be miserable over anything, he just cheerfully waited around for opportunity to straighten things out. As a matter of fact, he always had been able to straighten out all the tangles of his past. So now he held himself ready for the first opportunity that the evening's eventualities might bring.

Since the first visit of the men to the quarters of the host, certain changes had taken place. Frosby, it seemed, in having what he termed a mad on Mexican cookery, had imported a Chinaman to preside over his culinary department.

This Celestial, having been roughly hazed, range fashion, by friends of the discharged son of Jalisco,

had been fairly hurting to show the greasers what food might be and given *carte blanche* so far as was regionally possible in preparation of a birthday feast. The result lay spread out the length and breadth of the board, even to a frosted birthday cake with twenty tall tapers to designate the august years of the birthday girl's majority.

Frosby was as bland as melted butter. "This had better be no set and be served, but a round about and reach," he suggested, with his inciting laugh.

"A cafeteria—the Western kind of thing!" approved Zena, gracious to everybody, except that one to whom ordinarily she would have been most gracious.

"My idea's speed, ma'am. If my chink ever got started passing all he's prepared table-de-hotey style, we'd be into to-morrow just starting on the program of this here party, which is now getting under way. There's to be singing by the only vaquero quintet in captivity, to say nothing of the .45 salute to the birthday lady, and perhaps—I'm not promising this last number, mind you—only perhaps there's to be some extra fancy dancing by our friend Mr. Rack here and Señorita Poison-to-Gringos, giving the dame a name what she's well earned in her past."

"I'll appreciate the salute, Regal," Angelica said

with qualification in her glance and tone. "And I always enjoy hearing your cowboys sing."

"But not another dance stunt?" Crozier asked, in a not unnatural enjoyment of the contretemps. "You've got to acknowledge, all of you who watched Rackowe, that our friend shakes a wicked hoof."

"Wicked, yes," Zena agreed. "But if said Señorita Poison-to-Gringos—well, we don't exactly want any one poisoned, do we?"

Lambert, perhaps because he had some chips staked on the jack, came unexpectedly to the rescue; he changed the subject.

"That there looks like a real cake, but it won't taste the same if them tallows keep on a-drippin'. Shouldn't the person the party's give for be after a-blowing of them out? Come on, gal alive—officiate!"

But the person the party was give for looked confused by his demand. "What is it I'm to do?" Angelica asked. "Since my father died I—I've never had a birthday cake and I was too young then to remember."

"G'wan, you know you have one every year," bellowed old Whitebush, indiscreet from various potions.

But his niece was past being intimidated; she was

herself at last, living to-night. "I know I haven't and so do you!" She turned to Mrs. Barnett. "I'm sure you've had many a birthday cake for Zena. What is it I should do?"

"The tradition varies," the widow responded. "We used to give everybody a trial at blowing out the candle. How was it, Zena, dear?"

"Why, every light left burning after each blow is supposed to mean a year away from marriage for the blower—of course you remember that, Leonora!"

From the chorus of demands, it seemed as though everybody wished to blow at once.

"It's Angelica's party—let her decide," Mrs. Barnett suggested.

With a relighting taper thrust into her hand by Regal, the ranch girl glanced among their eager faces with childlike solemnity. She looked to several present far more desirable than the cake. The mother in her singled out the oppressed Rackowe.

"Your first blow," she said.

"I haven't much strength left," he objected with a whimsical, meaning smile. "I'm afraid I couldn't blow out one. I'll never be married, for what woman would risk herself to a fickle villain like me?"

Angelica, however, insisted that he permit the candles to decide.

Rackowe did try; tried hard, they all saw. Only one candle was left alight at the finish of his blow.

"You'll be married within the year," Zena exclaimed, evidently forgetting in the excitement her displeasure. "Angel, may I try next? Quick, light them up again!"

And she, too, blew out all but one of the twenty, closely-bunched lights.

Angelica tried to join in the general handclapping and teasing congratulations, but she felt annoyed—as much annoyed as Cecil Joseph looked.

Victor Lambert was awarded the next chance to blow and leered at the widow forlornly when, from wheeziness, he puffed out only two candles. His despair increased when Mrs. Barnett's careless light breath left all aglow.

"Evidently these candles don't believe in second marriages," she remarked without feeling. "Well, I've had my turn."

Regal Frosby's impatience had been growing with each glance at the officiating, birthday child, truly as bright-eyed as any lighted candle.

"Light 'em up; let me try!" the host cried. His eyes on Angelica, he blew mightily, but his breath went far afield. Although many tapers flickered, only five went out. With a half-caught imprecation

he turned away to pour himself another drink. Apparently there were too many years of single blessedness ahead to bother counting—an unendurable verdict.

"It's all plumb foolishment, anyhow!" Frosby growled.

"I don't know about that; let me see," suggested Crozier.

He aimed deliberately and moderately; he exhaled. A salute of several-voiced delight arose when, in his case, also, only one candle was left burning to limit his bachelor career.

Turning to Zena, he exclaimed regardless of the rest: "You see I'm in the running, at least!"

Rackowe, too, looked pleased and interested. As for Angelica, so hard had her heart begun to hammer when she saw the flash of his eyes, that she scarcely could relight the tapers for trembling. She was sure she would put out none at all, that she would find herself in her uncle's class. But somehow Angelica pulled herself together. She thought a prayer, filled her lungs, and blew. She had done it. There was only one candle lighted. She, too, was still in the running.

The silence that had fallen upon them was broken

by Lambert. "A foursome of you to be hitched within a year," he said. "I don't believe in candle blowing for grown folks anyway, but will some one tell me this—which of you is to be hitched with which?"

That was just what the interested quartet was wondering.

CHAPTER XIV

MOONLIGHT MAID

NONE of the ranchman's guests was exactly clear afterward as to how Regal Frosby and Cecil Joseph Rackowe got started quarreling. It was at first a sort of repetition of Frosby's slurs about Señorita Gringo-Poison. To a certain degree he was under the influence of his ironically named Sunday-school distillation, but not enough to excuse the insults he sprinkled in with his maladroit attempts at persiflage. It looked as if Frosby was going to be too much for Quaker breeding.

The cloud threatened to burst over the festive board. It actually looked as though Rackowe would accept the insolent invitations for a come-back, no matter what the physical discrepancies. In time, however, Lambert remembered that a clash between these young bloods would be no aid to his game. On a pretext so flimsy as to show the lank Philadelphian more than ever a weak sister, the veteran safeguarded him out into the starry night.

Zena permitted their ungracious host to show her

the fine points of a prize stock saddle that was on a rack near his desk. Angelica engaged the two Easterners with plans for a ride on the morrow. Just when everything seemed safe, the uneasiness which had rested over all was returned by sounds of a scuffle outside.

Drawing a gun from the holster which was an incongruous decoration of his party garb, Frosby strode toward the door, almost to be bowled over as he reached it by Rackowe reëntering. The visitor was dragging a squirming, protesting some one behind him.

"Here's your bandit, Moonlight Maid!"

Directly before the girl, Rackowe stood upright his sputtering captive. For half a minute or so all stared aghast at Scary Gonzales, again in the toils of the unexpected, and for the third time held up in their midst.

"Your uncle and I bumped into him spying around outside," the young man explained. "You said I owed it to you to lay him at your feet. He couldn't get away from me this time."

"But he's going to—and pronto!"

All eyes, including Cecil's, turned upon the host, who had recovered from his unceremonious brushing aside. His gun bore down upon the captor.

"It's for Miss Colville to say——" Rackowe began bravely enough, but what would seem to be a constitutional state of fright stopped him. His grip upon the collar of the bandit relaxed.

"Scoot, Scary!" ordered the owner of the hacienda. "No man is ever held against his will, onct he's gained the protection of my yard and hospitality."

As at the hotel, the scar-faced Mexican wriggled himself out of the nearest exit, which in this instance proved to be an open window. Angelica turned away to hide her utter disappointment. Zena and Crozier exchanged glances, obviously of shame, for the member of their party who so persisted in showing off his incompetency.

Mrs. Barnett weakly sat down, and Lambert, returning, hastened to her with a glass of water. Rackowe stood unconscious of them all, shaking under the gaze of the three eyes that bore upon him—Frosby's own threatening pair and the frightsome third eye of the revolver.

Then, so suddenly that none ever remembered just what his preparatory movements were, "Aspen" Rackowe lengthened out and leaped. Frosby was taken—literally taken—by surprise. His gun spoke but once before it was wrested from his grasp, its bullet embedding harmlessly in the ceiling above.

Like a vine the lank Easterner wound his legs and arms about his tormentor. With a crash they went to the floor.

Freed from threat of gun point, as from a python's gaze, Rackowe proved a battling demon. He minded not the clumsy resistance offered by Frosby, trained only in gun fighting. In scarcely the time it takes to tell it, the owner of the Open and Shut had the use of one eye only. The other was closed on his defeat. Like Samson after Delilah had barbered his hair, this strong man seemed deprived of his strength with his weapon.

Not until his cries of "'Nough—'nough!" unheard by the battling Quaker, began to draw excited vaqueros from the dance hall, did Lambert take a hand. His bulk proved sufficient to drag the transformed aspen from the writhing tangle of combat on the floor.

"We'll explain out this here little mistake in the sweet sometime to come, son," Lambert said pantingly to the vanquished, while holding on to the bucking bronc of a victor. "This here party's over—done. We'd all best be on our way. Crozier, you fetch the ladies. I'll manage Mr. Clinging Ivy."

None opposed their progress to the waiting cars, the departure of which was announced by no toots

of triumph. The man who was to be known to that range in the future as "Clinging Ivy" Rackowe seemed content to be held by the older fire eater in the back seat of the flivver which Crozier drove.

"Won't some one tell me, if they don't mind, just whose bandit is Scary Gonzales?"

Regal Frosby, of course, was not there to put in any claim. Lambert, who once had paid off the subject of contention at the point of a gun, merely muttered mildly:

"Shet up, you fightin' fool. Ain't you made mess enough for one night?"

Robert Crozier, sponsor for an earlier release of the same reappearing Mexican, said nothing at all.

Strangely enough, back in the second car, Angelica Colville was asking herself a similar question. Whose protégé, too, or friend was Scary Gonzales—her uncle's, the handsome New Yorker's, or her defeated suitor's? She did not, however, express her perplexity aloud.

The truth is that Angelica's wonder was lost in importance beside the fact that Cecil Joseph Rackowe had performed the unprecedented feat of disarming the biggest bully of their range—and in his own ranch house at that!

CHAPTER XV

TAKING LESSONS

THERE was no target range on Arizomex Ranch. There is none, probably, on any regular ranch in the border States that stretch from the Gulf to the Pacific, where almost every one learns to shoot when he learns to ride in his earliest days.

Yet this afternoon any one passing across Barbed Barranca—one of the unfertile, cacti-grown, cañon-like washes that made the Lambert acres much less of an asset than they actually numbered—must have suspected that some novice was undergoing instructions from the hip.

The sound of revolver fire had not the irregular staccato of a brush between enemies. It was too timid and sustained for any battle unto death. Even the sharper bark of an automatic pistol, occasionally heard, did not indicate that any one was streaming fire at man or beast with serious intent. In fact, to practiced ears, the discharges would have sounded like nothing but target practice.

A close-up of the scene must have confirmed the conclusion of a shooting school and added the fact that it was a private one. The tutor was fair and frail; but she was firm, to judge by the crisp tones of criticism directed upward at her tall, somewhat lank, sandy-haired pupil who, in the rechambering of a .45, evidently was not handling the weapon to her satisfaction.

"Don't be afraid of it, Cecil Joseph," Angelica insisted. "The gun won't sting you as that rattler tried to just now. You'll never get anywhere in this game, no matter how sure your eye, unless you learn to cuddle a gun as you would a—a——"

"A friend like you?" he completed boldly; then, ramming home the remaining cartridges with assurance, Rackowe spun the cylinder and closed the gun with a snap.

"That's more like it," she approved, the coolness melting from her voice.

"Do you mean, Angel, that you'd like me to——"

The young woman's color mounted as she interrupted: "I mean that is more the way to handle what'll be your very best friend if you insist on buying a ranch on the border. Now then—empty her at the target."

"Into the target, don't you mean, dear teacher?"

"You know what I mean, confound you!" she snapped back. "Whang away, and for the rest of the lesson bridle your foolishness."

He placed the revolver in its holster, turned away from the printed target which, at a distance of twenty yards, was fastened to the trunk of a cactus at the presumable height of an upstanding man. Suddenly he whirled around, drew quickly, fired twice from the hip, then raised and pulled down the gun for the remaining charges.

Together they picked their way over the low-lying spiney growth with which all the Barbed Barranca was carpeted, to examine the tattered sheet. There were two clean bull's-eyes and, in the lighter surrounding circles, two tens, a five, and one miss.

"Not bad for a five-day amateur," Miss Colville admitted.

"Don't believe you could do better with all your experience," Rackowe praised himself with a frank show of pride.

"Don't you believe I couldn't; I'd have kept them going straight until the sixth got home. You began to wabble as soon as you had the gun out in front of you where your eyes glimpsed the shape of her."

After expressing belated admiration of the way in

which Rackowe had hurled himself on his tormentor, at the ball, and had disarmed and then fully punished him, Angelica had asked to know the reason behind the gun-shy trait which thrice had been exhibited in her presence.

The Easterner's explanation accounted not only for his trembling hands at their first meeting and again under their neighbor's muzzle, but for his fright in the mesquite arbor as well, and his later relinquishment to Crozier of the gun which she had not then suspected him of possessing. It had entirely reestablished him in that sympathetic friendship lighted to their mutual gaze by moonlight.

It was not unique, Rackowe's plight. Other men have suffered from the same sort of thing; and sometimes have conquered it, as Rackowe now was engaged in doing. In childhood, it seemed, he had strolled one evening with his father into a shadowed lane near their suburban home. There they had been encountered by a highwayman who, on the parent's resistance, had shot twice and fled, dropping his gun. This the boy had seized with intent to aid and accidentally had discharged a third time. The resultant cry of agony from his father, already felled by the robber's bullets, had been his last.

Only one of the three wounds, the autopsy dis-

closed, necessarily meant death. There had been no way of determining by which of his two assailants —the ruffian or his terrified little son—the fatal shot had been fired. As a result, the boy had carried up into youth and manhood a positive terror of fire-arms. And who shall say it was culpable? Certainly not Angel, who had mothered all the wounded—bird, beast, or human—that had come within radius of her protective care.

One of Rackowe's reasons for coming West, where weapons were still more a matter of course, had been his hope of overcoming the involuntary ague which affected him at sight of one.

"If I just can get the quakes out of my system," he had said in concluding his confession, "I'll feel like the man I know I am, instead of the boob I've managed so often to look."

In that sentiment Angelica had concurred by the prompt offer to become his teacher at gun handling. The target range in the out-of-way cañon had been visited. And there, after spoiling many boxes of cartridges, Rackowe's unfortunate but excusable nervousness was disappearing.

"Shall I try out the automatic again?" he asked at the conclusion of their examination of the messed target.

"Haven't we had enough Mexican Revolution for to-day?" she returned. "Suppose we learn some more about Mr. and Mrs. Cacti and all the little cacti-cusses."

This was another surprise lead which Angelica had discovered on closer acquaintance with Rackowe —that, although by profession a chemist, the Philadelphian was a naturalist.

She herself loved the flowers of their semiarid range—the white heliotrope, the thistle poppies, the rare but beautiful asters, the false tidytips. Even the matter-of-fact Regal Frosby once had been heard to remark: "I'll be dod-burned, Angy, if you don't fondle that there bunch of worthless hen-and-chicken blooms just like they was a live baby!" Thus their visitor's naturalistic bent was a bond of fair exchange between them; he was teaching her botany in return for her direction of his gunfire.

Down near the mouth of the barranca, where the two had left their horses, they returned to the further dissection of a barrel cactus, a growth which so often has been a life-saver to parched desert travelers. Rackowe cut off its top and, with the butt of the .45 —a gun, by the way, which is used by those who know for every utility under the sun from corkscrew to can opener—crushed the pulp found inside,

releasing its store of juice. This he poured into a collapsible silver drinking cup which he always carried and shared the drink with his interested companion in a toast to what he called "Our Mutual Aid Society."

"I've drunk in a real idea from this last barrel we've tapped," he remarked, fastidiously wiping a trace of cacti-juice stickiness from his lips.

Angelica perked her head a bit to one side in an attitude of receptiveness, much as did the impertinent chaparral cock who, from a near-by perch of vantage, was protesting their invasion of his cacti home.

"But it won't be of any value unless I can get rid of the spines," he qualified.

"In that case, don't waste our time with the telling. You can't get away with the jaggers when it comes to cacti. I've often wondered how many varieties there are, having been stuck so many different ways. Do you happen to know, Cecil Joe?"

It happened that Rackowe didn't but he expressed the belief that his friend Wharton James would. A volume of the great Californian was in the saddlebag of the roan allotted to the lanky Easterner for riding the range and this he retrieved without disturbing the nose-rubbing tête-à-tête under way between his mount and Somber, the top horse of the girl's string

of two. Returning to his seat beside her, he thumbed the pages until he came upon the report of an old prospector which James has set down, and read aloud:

> "By gosh, you city fellers have no idea how many kinds we got. I know every one of 'em. There's the 'full of stickers,' 'never-fail stickers,' 'stick everybody,' 'the stick and stay in,' 'the sharp stickers,' 'the extra-sharp stickers,' 'the big and little stickers,' 'stick while you sleep,' 'stick 'em alive,' 'stick through leather,' 'the stick in and never come out,' 'the stick-and-fester cactus,' 'the cat's claw cactus,' 'the barbed fishhook cactus,' 'the rattlesnake's fang cactus,' 'the stick-seven-ways-at-once cactus,' 'the impartial sticker,' 'the democratic sticker,' 'the deep sticker,' and a few others."

Amused over the account, Angelica leaned back in a way that was most natural, but heedless of vegetation possibilities. The hands which she threw out for support happened upon a spot covered as though by velvet, but in reality by the shed needles of an opuntia. Scores of microscopic thorns pierced her palms and fingers.

"Stung!" she cried. "Stung again for the millionth time! For the next day or two, while I'm mining for spines, I'll be in thorough agreement with your old prospector."

This mishap, which she declared she should have been wise enough to avoid, satisfied her thirst for cacti study for that day. They led their horses to the mouth of the barranca and were about to mount, when Rackowe, remembering an omitted part of their arms-and-the-man program, handed her his empty gun. From her hidden holster Angelica drew her own of like make and the same caliber.

She turned her back and juggled the weapons, then suddenly whirled and brought down one upon him, pulling the trigger with each jerk. It was his own empty gun she used, but Rackowe couldn't know that positively. From the first click, however, he stood without a quaver visible to her critical eye. This was the last test of each day in their campaign against gun shyness.

A duet of laughter interrupted the performance; brought confusion to tutor and pupil. From behind a concealing pinnacle of rock rode Zena Barnett and Robert Crozier.

"What in the world are you two doing?" called the man.

"Angel!" screamed the city girl in mock fright. "You're not trying to slay our only Cecil Joseph?"

Angelica suddenly discovered that Somber's cinch needed tightening and busied herself therewith.

Rackowe faced the music of their unmusical banter. "It's just a part of my hardening up, getting me used to the click of a gun."

Zena sobered down with a nod of friendly approval, for she knew the tragedy of his youth and the result that had followed it. But Crozier continued to laugh, until it seemed that he must ripple out of the saddle.

"If it's a hardening up you're after, old boy," he at last managed to articulate, "let me give you my undowny couch in the live-oak branches. That'll toughen you to anything."

"I meant to ask you to-night if you wouldn't trade with me," Rackowe countered quickly. "Shall we consider the swap accomplished?"

They did, and with more consequences than any of the four could have imagined as they mounted and rode back together to the big meal which Barbara was billed to have waiting.

CHAPTER XVI

INTO THE NIGHT

NOT even like that of a semi-invalid was the pace of the beautiful matron who, sunshade aloft, tripped out of the corral to meet the returning equestrians. The free swing of Mrs. Barnett as she came along was sprightly and urged by no unwonted hurry, merely a desire for exercise. Truly the Arizomex hot spring had worked a miracle for Leonora Barnett. A cure over which none marveled so much as the white-bearded faker and originator of the same, unless it was the niece who, by silence, had abetted him.

"I'm open for a riding engagement to-morrow," Mrs. Barnett said with a gay salute. "Who wants to ride with rejuvenated me?"

"Sweetheart, you don't mean——" began her daughter.

"That I'm going to lope out of sight of the ranch house if I have to go alone. I feel younger even than you look, Zena, dear. All of the old pains have

plumb vamosed as that magician, Doctor Lambert, promised they would—in those very words."

While the daughter rushed to her best beloved for a filial embrace, Rackowe proposed a straw-drawing contest with Crozier over which should have the escort honor on an event that meant so much to all of them.

Angelica was engaged to break the straws and was in the act of presenting them when her uncle Victor Valentine, who had been away from the ranch all day on mysterious business, loped up on his trim thoroughbred. This animal was one of his few personal extravagances and he sat it exceedingly well, considering his years.

"Leave me in on this hugging! What's it all about, anyway?" he demanded.

Zena told him the good news, and Angelica explained the means by which the standing question as to which of their men guests should brush stirrups with the cured invalid was about to be decided.

"You young bucks draw away if the game amuses you, but you're only wasting time. There's nothing to gamble for. Lady Leonora rides with yours truly and don't none of you dare think otherwise!" All of this Lambert delivered with a surpassing flourish and punctuated with a hat-sweeping bow.

"Doctor's orders—I must obey," the smiling widow agreed, nothing loath. "His invitation to this wonderful private spring of his is going to make a new woman out of me."

Scrap iron and drug-store sulphur—artesian water run over the same—warmed up in a gasoline heater—it was a wonderful spring, indeed! Thus ran the guilty thoughts of Angelica Colville as she tried to catch the eye of the old scoundrel to whom she was related, actually to compliment him on his scientific coup.

Lambert, however, was too occupied even to glance at his niece. Dismounting, he tossed the reins of his mount to Crozier who stood nearest, with a nonchalant, "You won't mind undressing Boy for me, will you?" and started off toward the house with the fair, if forty, Leonora.

"Fast worker for an old one, I'll say," remarked Crozier with a laugh at himself and the task assigned him.

Despite Angelica's wish to summon a ranch hand to care for the horse, Crozier insisted on stabling the Arabian as he had been ordered to do.

"Isn't it just glorious—mother's improvement?" Zena said, finishing the embrace which the veteran beau's arrival had interrupted.

Her decision to wait for Crozier gave tutor and pupil a stroll to the log house alone.

"It's a wonder," observed Rackowe, after they had covered a rod or so, "that our wrong thoughts don't confine most all of us in hospitals. More wonderful still is how quickly thoughts righted will cure us. Now there's that gun fear that has made a shaker out of me for years and——"

Angelica glanced up at him suspiciously. "You weren't thinking in particular of that?" she interrupted.

"Not altogether. No."

"You've found out about the 'spring?'" The girl put her question with a quick intake of breath. In advance intuition had told her the answer and she wondered what effect it would have on this all-too-pleasant interlude in her sand-and-solitude life.

Rackowe's nod signified the fatal admission. Soon he qualified and explained. "I am a scientist by profession, you know. When I saw the almost-instant improvement in Leonora, I grew curious and—well, I made a sort of investigation, which may not seem to you a proper sort of return for your hospitality, but I was impelled by my feeling of protectorate over an old friend and a woman, to all intents and purposes exceedingly ill."

"I didn't blame you, when I found—scrap iron and lump sulphur?" All the sauce was gone from the Angel's voice. Her laugh contained little of mirth, as she added: "Some cure, isn't it?"

"I discovered the power of thought, little teacher, which is indeed some cure. If your Uncle V. V. only could make the suffering world believe as firmly as he made Leonora, you'd ranch patients on Arizomex, not cattle."

"You—you're not going to expose him?"

"Expose him? And spoil what is possibly the most worthy trick he ever has turned? Not your grateful Cecil Joe!"

Angelica celebrated by an easy breath. "But his motive——" she ventured again.

"Small matter what the motive is or what the cost. The result is what counts. If Leonora Barnett goes back to Philly free from thought-rheumatics, she can afford to pay."

And that was all of that.

At supper, old Victor Valentine Lambert offered a most interesting conversational titbit. He had dropped in upon his young partner, Frosby. Mr. Rackowe certainly had "bashed that buck up some." One of the victim's eyes still wore crape, although, under a treatment of raw beef applied each night, the

black was yellowing out. Frosby, according to Lambert, still was wondering what had hit him and beginning to be sorry for his own behavior or whatever it was that led up to it. Presently he'd be coming over and cleaning the slate by apologizing to the ladies.

"But what did he say about his stand-up for Scary?" Angelica asked.

The old ranchman evidently had expected some such poser. "Oh, Gonzales was only one of those what you might call incidents of an unfortunate occasion," he replied, more or less vaguely.

"Well, he's more than an incident in my mind!" retorted the girl. "Regal will have to herd up more than a hospitality excuse before he satisfies me as to why he let the brute go when Cecil Joseph had dragged him in as my especial prize. That bandit's due to answer to somebody for nearly choking me to death!"

"I am telling you, gal alive, that Rackowe's manhandling of that loco Mex was only a pretext for something else again."

"Did you happen to find out, sir, just whose bandit Gonzales is?" The question popped from Rackowe.

Then Crozier raised a protesting hand. "You're

not going to hound down that poor old relic of a desperado, are you?"

His question was so mildly put that his intent—pacific or otherwise—was left in doubt to at least three members of the supper-table group.

"He's always getting himself in bad," the New Yorker went on. "I'm all but feeling sorry for him."

Angelica's highest-volt glare fastened on his handsome face from across the board. "Am I to believe, Mr. Crozier, that you think my neck the proper place for him to record his finger prints? Possibly you consider them decorative."

"A loop of black pearls, eh?" Victor Lambert's labored attempt at facetiousness surprised them. "Oh, let's forget the *cholo,* folks alive! It was on account of one of you women that Regal got riled with Cecil Joseph—I'll leave you to figger out among your own selves which and whether."

"If Frosby remains in the least dissatisfied with me or my behavior, I'll be pleased," began Rackowe in the steadiest of voices, although his lips had grown white during the conversation on what, to him, was a rather touchy subject.

Lambert held up both hands. "Calm yourself,

friend—calm yourself! Regal knows you gave him what was coming to him and, while I ain't no idee he'll apologize, he's willing to leave you alone from now on to henceforth. Further than which, this here deponent ain't going to say another word while there's a pleasanter subject to wrastle with and plenty of grub to chaw." And Lambert, true to his promise, said no more.

When, after supper, Crozier declared that he had a headache from inactivity and was going to ride it off out in the fresh air of the range, none connected his departure with the dining-room controversy. The Barnett women elected to give Angelica another lesson in bridge, all three scorning Victor Valentine's hearty offer to join them if they'd play stud.

"I'm turned down cold, Rackowe," he said to the remaining male guest. "I suppose you'll be wanting to put me through some more cross-examination on the all-fired subject of ranching on your own?"

"If it doesn't bore you, there are some further details I'd like to learn," the young Easterner admitted.

"Ask him how many varieties of cacti there are," suggested Angelica from the improvised card table, as the two men drew up their chairs to the wood

fire which had been lighted on the hearth, more for its cheer than actual need of warmth.

And cacti did prove to be the first subject opened between them. How many of the Arizomex acres, Rackowe wanted to know, were made worthless by the prickly growth? More than the owner liked to think of. It was indeed fortunate that the ranch was so large that the thorn patches were not missed.

"Ever try pasturing cows on them?" asked the pilgrim.

Lambert laughed; indeed, the question must have struck him—or any one acquainted with the *Mammillaria* family—as humorous. It was a moment before the ranchman could answer.

"I've got away with greasewood and paloverde as browse when other forage ran short, but I've yet to find the cow what thinks his stomach enough of a pincushion to tackle cacti."

Rackowe evidently thought wise to break away from the subject; he asked how Lambert had come to own the ranch.

Behind his white-beard mask the old ranchman concealed his distaste for this question; distaste that had best not be shown before a prospective purchaser, even if said prospect didn't yet know that

he was so slated. Lambert glanced around nervously, however, to see that Angelica was absorbed in her game, then drew his chair closer and applied the newly acquired muffler to his voice.

"Don't want to get the family pepper pot shook up none," he said raspingly in explanation of this behavior. "Never talk of it before Angy, seeing as how her dad's concerned. But it was like this: I come down here from Montana after I'd cleaned up on a real stock range to see how my sister's only offspring was faring. Found things going none too well with Colville: he was a cultus rancher—mixed sheep with cows and all that sort of rot. I had money in the bank and helped him over a couple of rough seasons, staying on and getting to kind of love this poor little motherless kid. Her dad's debt grew and the interest of it wore on him, though Lord knows I never was pressing about it."

Lambert paused under pretense of getting an ember from the fireplace to relight his pipe; really, as Rackowe observed, the delay was to assure himself of his niece's interest in the new game. It was exceedingly considerate of the old termagant, the Philadelphian thought gratefully, for he was the last person to wish to distress his little tutor with post-mortems.

"Well, sir, it all come to a peculiar pass one evening," Lambert went on, after a thoughtful puff or two from the now thoroughly alive pipe. "My brother-in-law faced me with a proposition. He always was a shark at poker and keen for the game. Notice how nifty the girl takes to cards? Man alive, it's inherited.

" 'Vic,' says he, 'I owe you a hide full of money and I own a darned fine ranch. I'll poker you the ranch agin' my debt to you.' I thought a moment, having in mind the girl's best interest, as well as my own. 'If you'll make it cold hands for single stacks of chips, I'm on,' says I, knowing that with his skill I'd have no chance at draw and scarce more at stud. I could see it kinda jarred him, this proposition of leaving it all to the run of the cards, but he was a born gambler, same as you see Angy is. We went at it, and the session was short."

Lambert stroked his beard reminiscently for a moment, then resumed his account. "From the start the cards run with me, just like they knowed it'd be better for all concerned for me to have the run of the ranch. When his last chip was gone, Colville went over to the desk and filled out a deed and a couple of the boys from the bunk shack witnessed her. Then he went out for air."

The old man's voice had tapered toward the close, until it ended scarcely above a whisper.

"And what became of her father?" Rackowe asked guardedly after a moment of waiting.

"Quién sabe—and that goes for all hands round. Some time in the night he rode away, without leaving a word for his kid, to say nothing of me who had only everybody's best interest to heart. We trailed him two night camps into Mexico, but farther than that, not a sign. Most of us figgered out that he'd gone south to make a fresh stake. But as to what actually became of him, why, any one of a hundred things might have happened."

"How long ago was it—that night he rode away?"

"Ten years now, nigh to a day, and not one word from or of him since. I done my best for Angy, snap turtle though she be, and when I'm called she'll get everything I have, even if she don't seem to love her old uncle like she'd oughta. But I can't help blaming myself now and then for that one-sided poker game."

"I should hope you couldn't!" was Rackowe's unspoken thought.

The hardened old scamp arose and declared it time for all good Arizonans to be off to bed, especially

ones under process of being naturalized under hot-spring treatment.

"Soon as we've finished the rubber, doctor," called the widow pleasantly.

But Lambert, disgruntled by their exclusiveness of interest, did not wait. And before the game ended Crozier had come in from his headache cure. This, it developed, had been taken in his rented car and not on horseback, as they had supposed.

"That swap we made at the barranca's mouth—is it still on?" asked Rackowe.

"Climb to it, old man, and sweet dreams!"

When, a moment later, the five broke up for the night, the sandy-haired Easterner repaired with his pajamas and traveling toilet kit to the emergency chamber in the boundary live oak. His mind still was occupied with that last poker game of the "born gambler" Colville and, correlatively, with the question of old Lambert's honesty in the clean-up of long ago. To what fate had the motherless kid's father ridden forth that tragic night?

After climbing the rustic ladder to the canopied platform, Rackowe turned on his pocket flash to see where and how the blankets were laid. But he never saw. Something very like a blanket itself fell over his head and enveloped him in its folds. After a

struggling breath or two he felt coming over him a drowsiness last experienced when going under gas in the chair of a Broad Street dentist. He was falling —falling. Where? Out of the tree, perhaps, down to—— But there was no stop. He continued to fall and fall.

CHAPTER XVII

PLAYING THE KING

AS Angelica Colville was first of the ranch-house complement to appear in the living room next morning, perhaps the events of what was destined to be the Arizomex house party's most exciting day so far would best be recounted through her very keen-sighted eyes.

After a night's sleep, undisturbed by any dream worth reporting to Mr. Freud for interpretation, she entered with a morning glow on her piquant face, clad in a simple frock of blue denim. Before Angelica had finished tidying up the room, she was joined by the Barnetts, looking rested, cool, and charming in still another change of costumes.

"Will they never run the gamut of their clothes?" the ranch girl asked herself, abandoning an interesting train of thought of something she meant to say to Cecil Joseph Rackowe when later they repaired to the target range in Barbed Barranca. She had overheard more of the fireplace conversation than either

of the men concerned imagined. She had reached the determination that her sandy-haired pupil should squander no one's money on the Arizomex failure—not if a plain-worded warning from her could prevent. Nothing of these serious considerations, however, showed in her greeting of the fair guests.

Next came her uncle, as usual bellowing his loudest. "Where's them he laggards of ourn?" Lambert demanded, after a nod for the two young women and a long look into the eyes of the widow patient. "What dum use is daylight saving if they sleep all the profits away? Zena, suppose you go out into the yard and twit-twit your Bobbie bird from outen his perch. I'll hammer up that lazy Rackowe person my own self."

With smiling assent to this order, the city girl brought up to service the other way around, went out the front door. The eccentric old ranchman crossed the living room to the hall that led to the sleeping quarters he had assigned the Quaker. At its entrance, however, he halted, then started back a step or two. Out strolled Robert Crozier, groomed to a hair; on his lips a genial good morning to all.

"What the jumpin' Jupiter!" exclaimed Lambert. "How come you to be sleeping indoors, after I go to all that there sleeping-porch trouble?"

"Swapped blankets, I suppose you'd call it," explained Crozier. "Racky discovered that he was too soft and wanted to try my hard perch in the live oak. I always like to do that youth a bad turn, you know."

Angelica had forgotten the offer and acceptance made on the range the previous afternoon. Probably Zena had, too, judging by her departure on the alarm-clock mission. The ranch girl stepped to the door.

"Be careful what name you use, Zena," she called after her friend. "You're after Cecil Joe, not Robert C. They traded bunks, don't you remember?"

Presently, however, the messenger returned wearing a defeated expression. "For a Quaker of such exemplary habits, he certainly sleeps the sleep of the dead. I can't get him up in the morning—at least not this morning."

"Possibly you didn't use the right trill for that particular bird in a tree," suggested Crozier with a meaning smile. "Suppose Miss Angelica tries her throat; angels, being winged, you know, may be better understood by birds."

Two glances from as many displeased young women followed the suggestion.

"Why didn't you climb clean up and shake him

out?" queried the old ranchman with a raucous laugh.

Zena chose to take the suggestion seriously. "I'd have climbed, Mr. Lambert, had there been any ladder."

Even before Crozier accepted this opportunity for a gibe at the expense of one who in the late past had ranked as his rival, Angelica felt a sinking at the heart for this latest show of temerity in Rackowe.

"Cecil Joseph seems to have diagnosed his own case down to the crossing of the 't'—s-o-f-t," the New Yorker observed. "He's pulled the ladder up after him for fear some ground mouse would follow and nibble his trembly toes."

"You know you don't believe that!" flashed Angelica. "It ain't Mr. Rackowe's toes that tremble, and, besides, it's no mouse he's afraid of."

Robert Crozier laughed again, evidently quite pleased with himself. "I stand corrected, sweet pepper—I mean paprika. If not his toes at a mouse, then perhaps his knees at—at the dark?"

Quickly Angelica went out to investigate for herself, the others following. The ladder was gone and her authoritative "Get up! Get up, Cecil Joe, or I'll never point another gun at you," with several variations and repetitions, brought no response. Her uncle

and the Crozier torment were letting out their lungs at her efforts.

Feeling already involved, Angelica decided to go the whole way. Nimble as a squirrel, she jumped, caught the lowest branch outflung by the live oak, and swung herself to it. Then she climbed to the platform like the boy her uncle called her. They did not hear her gasp of intuitive alarm, but the information she called down did startle them.

"He's not here!" Angelica had cried. "Even the blankets are gone!"

The first explanation came from Zena. "He's just playing one of his jokes. Look into the branches above the canopy."

Angelica, with accelerated heartbeats, did look, but saw nothing except clusters of thick, spiked leaves and festoons of gray Spanish moss. There was no one in the tree but herself.

Her eyes, searching the platform, were rewarded. When she returned to terra firma she carried over her shoulder a red serape bordered with green stripes, the most essential garment of Mexican male, afoot or on horseback. With this in hand, she walked directly to her uncle. "I found this hanging to a nail that had snagged it from some pair of Mexican shoulders," she said quietly. "The owner must have

been in considerable of a hurry or he'd never have left it."

"Well, I'll be dod-burned in all the fires——"

"Yes, yes," she prodded impatiently. "But do you realize what this serape means?"

Lambert stared, first at the gay blanket, then at Angelica.

"What, for Heaven's sake, does it mean?" The agitated inquiry came from Mrs. Barnett, who had gone suddenly pale.

Afterward Angelica remembered that the mother, not the daughter, had asked the question.

"It means," she replied directly enough, "that the ranch was raided by bandits in the night. They've rustled Cecil." She did not hesitate over this open use of his name—from now on her hand was to lie on the table. "It's plain as day that they've carried him off, for ransom or revenge or goodness knows what. And V. V. Lambert knows it as well as I, yet he stands there fingering that serape as if I were trying to sell it to him and he doubted its wool."

This last thrust seemed to awaken her relative. "Can't be for revenge, nohow," he objected. "Who'd want to get even with a simple pilgrim like Rackowe?"

"There's Scary Gonzales—the bandit!"

Angelica s suggestion was addended by a vehement nod from Zena, who seemed at last to have awakened to the possible plight of her friend.

Never had Robert Crozier's laugh sounded so irritating. "What a scream, what a scream!" he cried. "I see the whole fell farce of a plot. It's the sort Gilbert and Sullivan would produce if they were alive and writing for the movies."

The unseemliness of his levity struck them all, but it was left to Lambert to reproach him.

"Quit snorting, Crozier!" the veteran roared. "This here is a plumb serious shenanigan. If you got any sober explanation to pitch into the pot, chip her out!"

"I'll ask just one question—who knew Rackowe was going to by-bys in the treetops last night?"

This gave them pause for thought. Only the two girls knew—they and, of course, Crozier himself. That her uncle was in ignorance of their "swap" of outer for inner bedrooms the ranch girl was convinced when she remembered his look of genuine amazement at the appearance of the New Yorker from the inner.

"One more question," Crozier continued. "How many people knew that I was in the habit of using that over-breezy sleeping porch?" He waited a mo-

ment, then answered himself. "All northern Mexico could have known it through the gossip of your vaqueros, Lambert. Also, it is generally known—rather, supposed—that I am well fixed. The joke that made me momentarily forgetful of Rackowe's plight came from thinking how disappointed the bandits will be when they find they've carted off the wrong-sized bank roll. They came here, without doubt, to kidnap one Robert Crozier, probably with drafts on his bankers already made out in blank."

The solution sounded logical and disposed of less tenable theories, giving an opéra-bouffe motif to the whole piece which so lately had seemed a tragedy.

Angelica alone had a suspect in the event that Rackowe had been mistaken for his wealthy fellow traveler. Her eyes leveled upon her guardian's, but could not hold his gaze long enough to read any substantiation or denial of the truth.

"Let's go and have breakfast, then decide what's first and best to do," the host suggested and started for the house.

With the others Angelica followed, perforce. But her mind, for the moment, was back in the counting room of the Lariat National. The insinuating H. C. L. was among those present—and she in a very back seat. Was this, then, the way The Fox's goat had been told to play the king?

CHAPTER XVIII

ANSWERING ANGELICA

AT breakfast there was plenty to talk about—too much and of the exciting sort that one might think would loosen tongues. In this instance, however, the thoughts of the breakfasters served only to curtail appetites. The interests involved were too diverse and serious for discourse.

If there was one subject common to their minds—beyond that of the missing Rackowe—it was Gonzales, the sadly scarred, often barefooted, alleged bandit. Reasonable it is to assume that, while everyone occasionally glanced toward the vacant chair between Zena Barnett and her mother, at least four of the five minds reverted occasionally to the reappearing Mexican.

The break of tension came, not with the coffee—for all had emptied at least one cup before tasting their cantaloupes—but with Mrs. Barnett's limit of endurance of the silence.

"Victor"—for once she addressed their host with-

out the usual accompaniment of an apologetic smile—"what sort of a serape did that native usually wear? I mean the one you held up and who afterward tried to rob Zena at the Grover Cleveland?"

"Now, ma'am—Lady Leonora, I was just a-trying to think myself if I'd ever seen that there yeller hide in any partic'ler serape. Somehow I can't seem to. It's the only article a Mex has more than one of—'cept shoes, if he has any, and children, of which he usually has too much of a flock."

"They're not like finger prints, then?" put in the New Yorker. "You can't identify a man poacher from across the line by the stripe of his serape, eh?"

The tone and look of Lambert, more than his words, were conversational; callously pleasant. From that remark on, come what might, Angelica knew that she hated Robert Crozier. She remembered, in the moment, that instinct had warned her against him at first sight, the day she was behind the wheel of the flivver in Mesquite Wells.

"A serape is nigh about as good an identification as a footprint in Rio quicksands," added the old ranchman.

"But it is a sign of a Mex, you agree to that, eh, Whitebush?"

The point of this barb from Angelica should have

warned her only uncle that she was on the warpath. Her mimicry of the New Yorker showed her in a sharp mood, also her use of the current sobriquet which she so much disliked that she often had tried to persuade him to go clean shaven. But he was more concerned in reactions on others than his niece, and, much irritated, he assailed her verbally in turn.

"Strikes me, this here's an occasion when a calf's O. K. to have around, but it sounds bah-bah when it tries to butt into the affairs of its elders."

For years he had tried to put her in her place by this range version of "children should be seen and not heard." This once, however, he failed egregiously.

"Strikes me," Angelica retorted with a vigorous thump on the table, "that if there was a he-man on the place, he'd be up and on his way retrieving Cecil Joseph Rackowe from the situation that Mr. Crozier finds such a joke."

The latter sprang to his feet and stared down at her. "Do you mean, Miss Colville, to accuse me of——"

"Oh, don't let's get to quarreling, dear friends!" Zena exclaimed, one hand catching her admirer's arm, the other extended toward the ranch girl appealingly. Tears sounded in her voice and welled into her eyes

as, also getting to her feet, she continued: "I am sure, Angel, that Robert has nothing to do with this painful matter; sure that he'll do his utmost to solve this mystery and restore one who has been like a brother to me all my——"

"Not exactly like a brother, my poor darling," her mother corrected, "although Cecil always has seemed like a son to me. I never suspected how much I cared for the boy until now that we've lost him. So loyal, so considerate, so kind, and——"

"Oh, Leonora, *don't*—I can't stand it!" Zena wailed, sinking gratefully into the widow's consoling embrace. "Take me—take me to your room. Maybe, alone, we can decide what is best to do."

Mrs. Barnett, weeping with her, supported her out, only pausing long enough at the door to admonish the two men: "Do you mean to sit here all day doing nothing? This very minute they may be torturing our poor friend."

Lambert arose hurriedly and rounded the table. He did not succeed in his effort to grasp one of the lovely widow's hands, both of which were around Zena. But he cleared his throat lustily and spoke with what assurance he could command.

"Dear madame—Mrs. B.—I would not have had this here thing happen from out of my front yard

for nothing at all. I'm scared it'll cause a setback in your treatment. You just gotta clear your mind of worry. Crozier and I'll pull out at onct in search of that scamp Gonzales. I ain't got a doubt that by sundown we'll come chugging back on high with your young friend in the tonneau, a bit trembly in the hands, like as not, but all strengthened up inside by his experience."

"Oh, dear Mr. Lambert, you fill me with hope again!" Leonora rewarded him. "If you say you'll find him, I know you'll do it, just as you cured me when you said you would. We'll keep up our courage, won't we, Zena? Until sundown, then, V. V.! If you want us for anything, Angel, you'll find us in our rooms."

An hour after the departure of her uncle and Crozier in the rented car across into the Republic of Trouble, the girl left in charge of the ranch had her second shock of the morning. Old Barbara waddled in to say that there was some one at the kitchen door who wished words with her. Hoping for news, even though it was only a demand for reward, she obeyed the summons at once, to find Scary Gonzales himself standing first on one bare foot then on the other, his battered hat in hand.

"I have come, missy señorita," he began after a

profound obeisance, "to speak to you those apology for my wickedness to you at the hotel. I am ver' mooch sorry. For prove I will perform onto you all such service within my might. If the missy señorita would but believe me that I have the great disgusto with my wretched self."

"Your disgusto with yourself is nothing to mine!" Angelica snapped, trying to throw off her daze of amazement at this development. "Who sent you?" she demanded.

"Don Regal—he say he keel Scary to death if he do not come to you and ask that you forgive. I will perform unto you——"

"You bet you will! You'll perform yourself to death in all such service as I lay out for you. If you don't——"

"What you like Scary to do, Señorita Lamber'?"

Thus presented with a man to direct, the girl found that she didn't know; couldn't decide. It was of vast importance to know that he whom they suspected of seizing Rackowe was in no likelihood guilty, as demonstrated by Gonzales' presence, hat in hand. She recalled, too, a certain "set a thief" adage. But Angelica thought that the better course would be to let the bandit wait around until she had thought over the emergency.

"You sit down on this bench beside the door—that's your first service—and stay here until I return." With a terrible glance she left him, pausing only to call back when halfway through the kitchen: "If Donna Barbara insults you with a piece of raisin pie, you eat it. If you don't, I'll have Don Regal keel you to death pronto."

When Angelica found herself alone with Zena in the pretty guest room she discovered that she did not wish to consult the Easterner as to what use to make of Scary, but something very different. From increasing embarrassment over the nature of the question she really wished to ask, Angelica began with an indirection unusual for her: "Would you mind telling me, Zena, whether Robert Crozier has any special reason for disliking Cecil Joseph?"

"Isn't natural antipathy enough?" she was asked in turn.

"No; it's not nearly enough, if he has had any hand in this outrageous abduction."

"You don't really think, Angela, that Robert would be so jealous that he——"

"He might, particularly if you haven't given him an answer yet. What I'd like to ask you—and you needn't tell me if you don't want to—is whether

or not you're out and out engaged to either of them?"

With desperate eagerness the ranch girl awaited her city sister's reply, although she stared out the window lest the life-and-death anxiety be seen in her eyes. Minutes, hours seemed to elapse.

Then Zena rose and crossed to the girl of the West. "First, would you mind telling me, child, why you want to know?"

"Yes, I would," snapped Angelica; then, on second thought, added less revealingly: "No, I wouldn't. If a man fears that another man is going to get the girl he wants, that gives him a motive for wishing his rival out of the way."

"Of course, if he is unscrupulous. But I don't—I can't believe that Robert—— I'll confess to you, Angelica, that I don't somehow altogether trust Robert Crozier. You see, I haven't known him a long time, and I'm not sure of him. But I don't believe that he would——"

For several seconds Zena, too, gazed out of the window, seeing nothing that lay within range. Then she turned and forced the younger girl to meet her searching gaze.

"Angel, the real reason you want to know whether I am engaged to Cecil Rackowe is because you're

in love with him yourself. Oh, don't deny it; I've seen it—I know it—and it is nothing to be ashamed of. 'Love and smoke,' according to the old French proverb, 'are unable to conceal themselves.'"

"Maybe they ain't, but what of it?" Angelica laughed miserably, but bravely. "It's my trouble; nobody else's; and I'll manage it. What I want is to find him and after he's found to see him get the girl he cares for."

"You dear child! Don't you suppose that is what I want, too? And I suspect that you're the one. Oh, don't deny that, either! I've seen a lot these last few days and I'd be the last to begrudge him to you."

"You—you would, Zena? Why, from what your mother has said, I thought—I was afraid that——"

With a light sigh and a wistful sort of smile the remarkable girl put her arm around the waif she had sincerely undertaken to befriend and uplift, and freely came the explanation:

"I don't mind acknowledging that I am fond of Cecil Joseph, and that until last week I had given serious thought to the question of marrying him. But I love him well enough to feel like a sister toward him if he prefers. He's a splendid chap, Angy,

gentle and clever in a way that he conceals carefully, honest and dependable.

"The question between us," Zena went on, "has stood open all our grown-up life. Our families have pushed it in the first place, not he himself, as should be the case. When he comes back—for he's surely coming—I am going to free him of any obligation toward me. He has a better right to his own choice than most men, and he's going to have it. There, plucky girl, are you answered?"

"I am," Angelica gulped—"both ways."

All the more complicated grew Angelica Colville's affairs when, later that afternoon, another active element in them dashed up to the front porch—Regal Frosby. Scarcely a trace of the punishment he had received at the hands of the missing pilgrim showed in his face and none at all in his mood. He was, indeed, unwontedly subdued.

First Frosby wished to know whether Gonzales, whom he had sent over, had made proper apologies for behavior of which the ranchman had but recently learned. Incidentally he mentioned that the Mexican had spent the previous night at the Open and Shut, which cleared away the last suspicion in

Angelica's mind that he might have had a hand in the man rustling.

Not until she had all his news and was perilously near the brink of a love scene with him, did Angelica spar by telling him her news. Frosby's surprise was manifest; he couldn't imagine what the game could be; he rather liked the "Back East fighting cock" now that he had shown himself "stuffed with stuffin's" and hoped that no real harm had come to him. Was there anything he could do? Surely Angy knew that he'd do anything—*anything*—to please her!

What Frosby had come over for, as a matter of fact, was to see if he couldn't put an end to the torturing doubt in which he had been of late. He was waxing so *loco* about Angelica that he couldn't sleep of nights, he said. Wasn't she ready to say the word? Why not a grand, impromptu wedding, while her Eastern friends were around to help in the celebration and tell them what was what?

His boisterous way of wooing, his fearsome sincerity and the threat in his bold eyes at her cold reception of his overtures, grew more and more repellent. But Angelica decided that discretion was the better part of honesty.

She had kept him on the anxious seat too long a time for him not to be able to stand it a little longer.

Moreover, as she astutely reminded herself, it was nothing but a sequined shawl that so had roused him to her desirability; the fact that she had been "dressed to advantage" at the birthday ball.

Again, she owed Frosby something for the lapse in his love that first evening, when he had seen the fine-face-and-fine-feather combination of Zena Barnett. Although she would not have attempted the slightest settlement of this score on her own account, she thought wiser for the sake of others not to present him with his walking papers at that trying moment. They just might need the helping hand that Regal had offered in retrieving Rackowe.

Lambert and Crozier returned late to supper that evening, hard ridden and discouraged. They had burned up miles of distance and blown out most of the hired machine's tires. They had asked questions until they were hoarse, but they had heard nothing of the missing man.

It was the New Yorker's opinion that the best move he could make would be to drive into Mesquite Wells and get busy on the wires. He had influence in Washington, he declared, and this was a case in which the government could well get diplomatically busy with Mexico City. He merely made the sug-

gestion, but would do whatever the rest deemed most advisable.

None, however, seemed decidedly of any opinion. Mrs. Barnett had succumbed to the strain; she chiefly wept from the combination, she said, of her worry and a return attack of neuritis. Zena chiefly asked questions and then asked for explanations of the replies. Lambert said nothing, and as for Angelica, she was making up her mind to something which soon took effect in action.

The meal over, she left her guests pondering on the front porch and followed her uncle to his room, where he had repaired to jack his riding boots. There she engaged him in what she announced as a straight flush talk.

"I believe, V. V. Lambert, that you, and you alone, are responsible for this rustling," she said bitterly.

"Me? What a dum-blasted idee! What have I got agin' that shaking, clinging-ivy vine you're so stuck on? "

She passed the snarled insult. "You haven't anything against him and don't you try to bluff me. You thought your hirelings were getting Crozier."

"Holy hemlock! What would I be wanting to do that for? Say, Angy, you deserve worse than

I——" In his rageful incoherence, he hurled the bootjack so accurately her way that she had to catch it on the fly to avoid being hit.

With his missile threateningly in hand, she approached the choleric relative of whom she dared no longer be afraid. For Rackowe's sake, Angelica considered, she could not be afraid. She fixed his upglaring eyes with a threatening look of her own.

"You've often said my dad was a born gambler," she began evenly. "Maybe I inherited poker sense from him. Or maybe I learned a little about the game from watching you misplay it. I'm his child, not yours, and I'm sitting in now to win. I've been playing against you all along, although you were too cocksure of your hand to notice what I was doing to the pot."

"W-wha'd'you mean?" he demanded, arrested by the strange tone and look of her with a late-born uneasiness as to what she might do if he drove her too hard.

"I mean that we've come to the showdown. Here's my top card: I know the whole scheme you cooked up with Livermore!"

"You—you don't!"

From the gasp of his denial, the girl got courage to go further than she had intended; she began to

bluff. "I do, and I'm prepared to send both of you to jail if you don't drop your cards. Get what I mean in particular? You ante up one white man, Cecil Joseph Rackowe by name, or I'll expose your marked deck. Come now, what have you got to say?"

The ranchman didn't appear to have much to say, except unconvincing, sputtered denials. She seemed to have the situation, as she had the bootjack, well in hand.

One thing in her calculations that evening, however, went wrong. Among the men professedly ready to follow whatever instructions she should decide to issue at the daybreak gathering which she scheduled, she had counted that one she had bribed to sit on the back bench with the piece of Barbara's incomparable raisin pie—Scary Gonzales. But when she went out to the kitchen regions to tell him where to bunk for the night, he had gone. Nor did his countrywoman know anything about him.

CHAPTER XIX

THE AWAKENING

STRONG daylight had come before Rackowe awakened the day after his forcible removal from the boundary live oak at bedtime. His head felt like a morning after of another sort—the sort he had experienced but once in his lifetime—as he pried open his eyes and stared up at a sky of cerulean blue. His next discovery was that he lay flat upon his back on a blanket spread over a bed that certainly was no softer than rock.

The feel of this blanket revived memories—unpleasant, gasping ones. As reviewing a nightmare, he recalled climbing the rustic ladder to the platform in the branches of the oak; the surprise of something falling upon him literally overhead, its folds closing tightly about him; his stifled outcry; an intake of sickly, sweetened breath; and then that interminable falling—falling. Well, evidently he had landed; at least he had pure air about and life enough left to breathe it. For a moment he was satisfied, thankful for small mercies.

Presently, as his mind grew wide awake, he became conscious of other things. Somewhere near by water was running—a creek, doubtless, since he assuredly lay in the open. Then he heard voices and, for a time, listened to them, trying to understand. It was when he failed in this effort that he summoned what strength he could command and effected a sitting posture.

He was in the open—a wild, utterly strange waste, principally of rock, diversified with scattered brush. The water he had heard was a small creek on the bank of which he sat.

Nor had the voices been any figment of an uneasy imagination. The two speakers were squatted on either side of a low fire half a dozen yards away, both smoking cigarettes. He had a moment in which to note that both were strangers to him; that they did not look like Mexicans, but had more the cast of the Indian faces he had studied at railway stations on the trip to Douglas. Apparently they were unconscious of his plight.

"Good morning!" Rackowe at last saluted them, deeming it best to be polite, although he had a strong suspicion that the morning was anything but good for him.

The pair, startled, leaped with catlike springs to

their feet. They scowled at him, much as enemy white brothers in the same circumstances would have done. A sentence or two they exchanged, which comprised only a couple of Spanish words, the others clear out of the captive's lingual range. At a nod from the shorter of the two, the taller picked up a wicker-covered bottle and strode forward.

"So, señor, you wake at the last?" he said, rather superfluously, stopping a few feet distant and staring down at Rackowe as if at some curiosity. He tapped his head with a begrimed forefinger. "Him hurt—*si?*"

Rackowe could assent to that and did so with a nod that made him hurt the more.

"Take um long drink—*tequila,*" his new acquaintance suggested, offering the bottle.

Rackowe had been warned against *tequila,* along with other Mexican drinks, but he felt quite certain that it could not make him feel any worse than he already did, while it just might help as medicine. He drank, and it aided. He was inspired to try getting to his feet and he succeeded, although to find himself quite unsteady.

"Who're you?" he demanded.

"Me, Jack. Him, brother to Jack." The man who had given him the drink pointed to the shorter

native, who had resumed his squatted pose before the fire and become engaged in brushing his hair. "Him no much good—can no spike the Inglish parfec' like Jack spike her."

"Since you spike said Inglish so parfec', suppose you tell me how I come to be here?"

"You fall down from tree—mos' careless." The man, presumably an educated Indian, was grinning at him. "We take you pony track, savvy?"

Rackowe did not savvy to the satisfaction the other appeared to expect and put an impatient query as to whither they might be bound. Jack gestured vaguely to something behind the questioner. Turning, Rackowe made out a saw-toothed mountain range foreshortening the horizon to the south. He recognized that he was enjoying a close-up of the Mexican peaks seen from the porch of Arizomex.

Looking the Indian over more carefully, he noticed the comb from his traveling kit obtruding over the top of a wide, colorful sash. His glance comprised the squatted figure. The brush with which Jack's "No-spike Brother" was grooming his coarse, black locks had a military, strangely familiar look. Association of ideas caused Rackowe to slip his hands into his pockets, to find nothing. He had been robbed.

These two, then, were bandits of the sort the Philadelphian had heard about. They were probably a pair of the renegade Apaches who seldom made trips to north Mexico, except those which they personally conducted for the purpose of exacting ransom. And they were taking him into the mountains —would take him whether or no. His was not a pleasant prospect.

Rackowe's first thought was how much the ransom would be. Would his bank account stand it? Did his friends think enough of him to make up a pool and buy his release? What happened to one when no ransom materialized?

He asked the Indian to name a figure, but got only "quién sabe?" for his pains. The two words soon grew tiresome to his ears, as they became the stock answer to all questions bearing on his fate.

He walked over to the creek and bathed his aching head, his captors offering no objection. His brain cleared further and he advanced somewhat in his conclusions. Probably the Indians themselves had not planned his kidnaping, but some one in touch with the settlements. Instantly Scary Gonzales came into mind, as he had into the minds of the Arizomex group who, just about the same time, were thrown

into their first agitation over the empty tree and Rackowe's disappearance.

And the thought occurred to him, as to the others, that he had been swiped by mistake. There wasn't necessarily any telepathy about that coincidence. Scary was the only bandit he knew by sight, and Robert Crozier would have been rich pickings for any outlaw band, while Rackowe himself was not.

He reclimbed the bank and endeavored to make this obvious error plain to Jack, but did not succeed. Jack wasn't interested. Indeed, it would have been easier to establish a check-cashing identification with a border hotel keeper. Neither Rackowe nor Crozier meant anything in the life of the stalwart aborigine.

The unconversational Indian turned away to speak with his less conversational brother. Evidently the brother was amusing in his mixed Spanish Apache, if that was his language, for during his grunted discourse, Jack indulged in several hearty laughs.

Since the brother did not speak English, Cecil Joseph felt that there was small use appealing to him. At that, there was a bond between them, as he saw on closer inspection. Beneath a soiled shirt of faded flannel, Brother wore next to a suspiciously greasy skin the Rackowe pajama shirt of pale-blue silk. The former owner felt that he was not drawing too long a

bow in the surmise that the nether section of the lost-forever suit was glorifying—under overalls—Jack's lanky legs.

The next camp activity caused the captive to remember rather acutely that it was his custom, after morning ablutions, to partake of substantial nourishment. Jack's brother had begun to throw saddles on the backs of the three raw-boned cayuses picketed near by.

"How about breakfast?" In fear of another of the seemingly epidemic "quién sabe" replies from Jack, Rackowe pantomimed by pointing to his mouth and working his jaws.

For answer, the Indian reached into a saddlebag and presented the Easterner with a piece of jerked venison. "Him last long time," he promised.

Duly Rackowe had considered resistance. From the moment of suspecting the nature of his plight he had been on a keen lookout for opportunity. But when the odds are two to one—the two heavily armed, while the one has only teeth and finger nails—sanity does not supply opportunity with a capital O.

Even had the angel's pupil been graduated with full honors from her target school of Barbed Barranca, he could have done nothing without a weapon. Ob-

viously it was not yet time to play any hundred-to-one shot. He might better give thanks that he had come from under the effect of the soporific with which the enveloping blanket had been infused, he decided, and suffer along for the nonce as easily as he might.

CHAPTER XX

ON MEXICAN TRAIL

WITHOUT ceremony the rustling party got under way; the short brother leading, Long Jack bringing up in the rear, their human loot between. Although Rackowe's guard appeared to take no interest in the back trail, which would indicate that they did not fear pursuit, their pace over the stony foothills was a stiff one.

During the first hour the captive learned two things. The piebald horse assigned to him was stone-blind and followed the trail only by keeping his ears turned forward for the hoof signals of the animal ahead. This fact doubtless accounted for its selection to carry the prisoner, as on him any bolting project would be foredoomed.

The other bit of knowledge gained was that the Mexican cow saddle which he straddled was exactly what the late Frederic Remington had called it—a double-barreled affair that would "eat a hole into a horse's spine and a pair of leather breeches at the

same time." And Rackowe happened to be wearing the blue flannels he had donned for the previous evening.

Their mooning was of the briefest; Jack not even dismounting. More of the venison was distributed and the *tequila* bottle passed. The pilgrim, however, preferred a draft from the canteen which hung from his saddle horn. When he refused the makings, Jack, with pronounced nonchalance, produced Rackowe's leather case from one of his pockets and offered the ex-owner one of his own cigars.

"Superior Habanas you carry," Rackowe observed pleasantly after a satisfying puff or two.

"Jack like him own." Pleasantly the Indian held up the cigarette he had deftly rolled.

Again starting, they turned out of the great barranca in which they had been traveling and took to a mountain so steep that Rackowe was reminded of a catch question of his youth—how can you climb a hill if you slide two steps backward for each one taken forward? The answer, unless his memory failed, was turn around.

This at times he was tempted to do for sake of Blind Buff—which name he had christened his mount. The handicapped equine was having a hard time of it on the signal system, not only slipping

back because of the steepness of ascent, but instinctively copying the slip sounds of his mentor higher up. Rackowe compromised by following the example of his guard—dismounting and leading.

The Philadelphian was no Alpiner, any more than was the horse assigned him, and the climb tortured him. Repeatedly the feeling of exhaustion almost overcame him, but Jack was always just behind to prod him on. At last, however, they gained a high mesa where riding again became possible, by contrast even pleasurable, despite the torture saddle.

They seemed to be following no trail, although probably the natives saw the blaze of one invisible to the greener's eyes. Certainly they passed no habitations; met no one on whom to use that overworked, double-service word, "Adios!"—at once the greeting and farewell of border paths. Yet Jack and Jack's brother seemed to know where they were going, in any event, for there never was any hesitation or discussion as to their course.

Their camp that night was under the pines of a mountain glen and selected through the fortuitous sighting of a maverick on a neighboring hillside. Brother brought down the stray steer with a long-distance rifle shot—a warning to the prisoner of what he might expect if he attempted a run-out,

as well as the promise of a real meal. Jack retrieved a generous chunk of the tenderloin, leaving the rest for the buzzards already winging overhead, quite as though the rifle's report had been their regular dinner gong.

After the trio had eaten their fill of roasted meat, the white member attacked the red with another volley of questions, only to draw that too pacific "quién sabe?" in return fire. Until blanket time they smoked around the embers.

And then Rackowe made the discovery that one or the other of the Indians might be a mind reader by avocation. Unable to appreciate the jokes of the native humorist through not understanding a word of them, he had worked out in his mind an elaborate plan of night escape which would be aided, as he then thought, by the fact that no physical restraint had been put upon his movements.

Imagine, then, Rackowe's chagrin when on the third dawn, Jack crossed to him and, with a dispatch which scarcely would have been believed possible, hog-tied him with knots, the intricacies of which not the saltiest tar could have solved.

The two did have the kindness, however, to roll the helpless Philadelphian in one of the blankets taken from Arizomex and pillow his head on the cow

saddle, all of which showed that for the present at least he was worth more to them alive than dead. With more philosophy than he previously had supposed he possessed, Rackowe took the frustration of his plot to escape as an omen that he was to have a night of natural sleep and settled to it.

However, one of several things that prevented him from succumbing immediately into this was a mental reversion to Angelica Colville as she had looked when offering to cure him of his lifelong fear of weapons; her earnest little face alive with motherliness and—— Just what else could have made it so tender and so dear?

Was it the response to feelings in himself which even now made his heart hammer against the ropes that bound him? But he had come West in part to give protection to the girl many expected him to marry against a man whom, instinctively, he did not trust. And here he was, whole-souledly in love with another and imminently in need of protection himself.

The last of Rackowe's musings—the one on which he at last fell asleep—was a conglomerate of Lambert's fireplace tales of the Apache renegades. Particularly did he recall that one of the lost mine of Tiopa and the secrecy which the Jesuit Fathers en-

joined upon all the people, after walling its mouth with a door of iron before they fled from the Apache devils.

The last sound of which Rackowe was conscious in his vast Sierra bedroom was the mournful yowling of a wolf on a near-by hill. It seemed to be demanding of the chilly night: "What will the morrow bring?"

The question was vital. To him, indeed, what would it bring?

CHAPTER XXI

THE MAN HIGHER UP

THE morrow of the lone wolf's wailing brought more bellows-bursting clambering for man and beasts, which only Rackowe's two guards seemed not to mind. Brother, who again led the way, improved every stretch of easy going by tickling his own pate with the borrowed military brush.

Almost could Rackowe forgive him the theft for the divertissement which his persistent use of the brush afforded. And Jack, of the rear guard, was manipulating the stolen comb on several of the occasions when the prisoner glanced back. Rackowe's own blond mane had to stay tousled, except for what his fingers could do toward separating, parting, and smoothing. That, however, was the least of his concerns.

It was past noon when the party reached a mountain park, naturally fenced with boulders, where the grass was high and the water clear. Although there was no sign of any habitation or even of temporary

shelter, the Indians unsaddled the three broncs and turned them loose.

Not until their involuntary guest saw the cleverness with which they cached the riding gear did he surmise that they had reached a camouflaged pasture—that the bandit hide-out was somewhere near by and to be approached on foot. Any one who chanced to pass that way—if any one not of their number ever did—in all probability would think the animals strays from the wild bands that range the hills; while the horses, with plenty of feed and water about, were as safe as though regularly stabled.

An advance of ten minutes on foot brought the three humans suddenly to the edge of a cañon—a jagged gash in the range that yawned for several hundred feet, from the unseen bottom of which arose the murmur of a stream. Rackowe saw to his amazement the ruin of an ancient cliff dwelling, perched like a dovecote against the opposite precipice.

Moreover, at almost the point of their emergence from the timber a natural bridge—a flat-topped wafer of rock—flung itself across the gap. Over this Jack's brother started with all the assurance of long usage; after him, at the other guard's prodding from behind, their captive stepped more gingerly.

At a distance of some two hundred feet the cross-

ing was effected—but to what purpose? They seemed to have come up against a solid wall of rock, polished so smooth by the wear of time that a scaling ladder would have availed them nothing. Half expecting some rock-smiting miracle by one or both of the natives, Rackowe waited. So did the Apaches, albeit with no sign of impatience or concern.

And there was something magical about the way in which a ladder presently showed from the overhang above, to be lowered by unseen hands until it rested firmly upon the floor of the rock bridge. Unnoticed by Rackowe, some signal must have been sent across the cañon to announce the party's arrival.

Without hesitation and with agility, the brother made the ascent.

"Climb him!" ordered Jack, prodding the prisoner's ribs with the point of his gun.

Having no choice, Rackowe climbed, grasping every rung with such a pinch that his nails were splintered. Always would he remember the ascent as the most nerve-racking thirty feet of his life, but he made it. Jack was right behind him with a grunt of easy satisfaction.

They had reached what evidently was the main court or plaza of the cliff dwelling, a leveled floor of rock extending several hundred feet along the face

of the cliff, with a width varying from fifty to a hundred feet. A stone house was built out into it, square, towerlike, provided with door and window spaces which never had been filled in. Closer to the back wall were other structures of varying shapes, the interior of the nearest of which seemed to extend, cavelike, into the mountainside.

In fact, the whole of this section, which Rackowe took to be the center of present occupancy of the ruin, was sheltered in the mysterious twilight of an enormous, open-mouthed cave, defiant of the ravages of time. It suggested an ancient castle. The ruins and their environs certainly seemed ideal for a bandit lair, so protected that one or two armed persons within could have held it against a regiment.

Standing near the top of the ladder, evidently awaiting further instructions, was a supple young woman who looked to be half Mexican, half Indian—a common enough type in the Sierras. Her hands undoubtedly had lowered the ladder of their ascent and entry. To which of the brothers she belonged was made plain by no demonstration of greeting to either. From the source of the directions which followed, however, Rackowe judged her to be Mrs. Jack.

Having reached trail's end, none of the captors

seemed to feel any particular anxiety about the prisoner. Brother raised the ladder over which they had climbed from the natural bridge, while the woman made herself busy with preparing a meal at the upper end of the plaza, whence promising odors soon began to float. Jack himself disappeared within the main house.

Presently all four sat down to a repast such as might have been served in any Mexican trail-side habitation. At the end of the feast, Jack proffered the American another of his own favorite brand of cigars, then stretched back with his brother to the satisfaction of their own finger-rolled cigarettes.

To Rackowe the time seemed ripe for further questions. These he began by asking the whereabouts of the boss bandit who alone, as had been made plain to him, could answer other than "quién sabe?" regarding his fate. The hombre in command, it appeared, was not just then at the *casa*. Doubtless he would materialize mañana or at least mañana mañana, which he figured out to be patois for tomorrow or the day after. In the meantime what would happen?

Jack answered this question eventually by arising and leading the way to the edge of the plaza. There a ladder led to a shelf of rock twenty or twenty-five

feet below, a ledge neatly walled by masonry at the outer edge against a sheer drop into the cañon.

"Climb him—down!" was the order.

Again, because perforce, Rackowe obeyed. No sooner had he stepped from the lowest rung than the ladder was drawn upward. A brief examination showed a cave supplied with blankets, a jar of water, a dish each of *tortillas* and venison—as reasonable a supply of creature comforts as any prisoner might ask.

In fact, considered as a prison, this individual cave dwelling was not at all bad. Its location was such that momentary calculation showed the utter impossibility of escape, thus withdrawing the harassment of prison's most torturing hope. He could exercise at will in the shaded opening of his front yard and the cave afforded every protection against a change of weather.

Rackowe could sleep, eat, drink, and be anything but merry. Also, he had the satisfaction of knowing that he caused his jailers no concern. When they wanted him they had merely to lower the ladder and order him up; if he did not come, descend and prod him into hustling. Altogether he might have fared much worse.

There was no hint of prison reek about this pre-

historic place; no bars to oppress or doors to clang. There were even pictographs upon the walls, by the deciphering of the meaning of which he might divert his mind.

Nothing of note occurred until an extra-heavy twilight announced that the day was going out. Then weird strains began to percolate to Rackowe's ears—not the wheeze of the usual Mexican "fiddle," but the notes of a fine-quality violin, issuing not from the plaza above, but seemingly from some balcony like his own and on about the same level.

As his cell occupied the inner side of a curve in the cliff wall he could see neither up nor down the cañon to any distance; he could determine nothing. But the suspicion grew strong within him that he was not the only prisoner held at the caves. This grew into certainty when, intently listening, he began to make out English words in a weak but musical tenor voice which took up the air prefaced by minor chords on the stringed instrument.

"Should old acquaintance be forgot——"

Who could be singing that old Scottish air in this solitude? Rackowe's desire to know increased as he filled in line after line, which actually didn't carry

to him, of the wavering but evidently once-trained voice. Near the finish of the first chorus he joined in heartily:

"In the days of Auld Lang Syne."

Soon he stopped to listen again. Utter silence rewarded him, as though the singer had been surprised or offended by his interruption: "Hello, over there! Who are you?"

To his repeated shouts there came no answer. After what seemed an interminable interval, however, the violin prefaced another, even more familiar tune:

"Mid pleasures and palaces though we may
roam,
Be it ever so humble, there's no place like home."

Rackowe's heart swelled to the wistfulness in the lone singer's song. Indeed, indeed, there was no place like home. But could this wilderness be home to a fellow man with that touch on a fine violin; that knowledge of the most beloved melody of all white races; that refinement of tone quality and enunciation?

To Rackowe's queries, as to his repeated calls,

there came no answer that night. In time he fell asleep from weariness of wondering.

Breakfast next morning wasn't exactly served to the nonpaying guest in bed; rather, it was lowered to him piping hot in a couple of small tin pails that once had held lard; one was half full of the breed cook's really superior coffee. Tied to the handle of the larger container—a last and most grateful touch—was another of his own cigars.

Again he tried to establish communication with the violinist of the night before; the singer who so delightfully had sung the evening hymn without a taint of foreign accent. But as before, he failed and turned to the pictographs in lieu of a morning newspaper.

It was midafternoon, to judge by the sun rays which slanted under the sheltering overhang, when again the ladder was lowered. The head of Jack appeared at the top and a summons to ascend it was wafted down. Rackowe, by now something of an expert at scaling ladders, ascended nimbly.

"The boss, he have arrive'," announced the Indian and led the way along the plaza toward the main house, the towerlike one which stood out from the wall.

With no particular sense of fear or nervousness

Rackowe followed. He was too thoroughly in the clutch of circumstance for any superfluous emotion. He welcomed the interview in the hope that it would at least reveal the real arbiter of his fate. He could only hope that this would prove to be some one who could be persuaded of the difference, so far as financial outcome was concerned, between one Rackowe and one Crozier.

In his eagerness he strode ahead of his guide and rounded a corner of the house. He drew up short before a man squatted upon a folded blanket, his back against the masonry wall.

"*Buenos dias,* señor!"

Rackowe stared, scarce believing his eyes. He listened, doubting his wontedly trusty ears. The greeting, in soft, almost friendly Spanish, had issued from thick lips, in a voice accompanied by a grin, which he several times had seen before.

It seemed almost ironical that the bandit chief should be one of the two men in the whole wide West whose enmity Rackowe had earned—Gonzales of the scar!

CHAPTER XXII

AN INVISIBLE MUSICIAN

THE thought immediately relieving Rackowe's anxiety at the recognition of his jailer in chief was that his surmise over the reason for carrying him off was wrong. Scary Gonzales well knew the difference between the Easterner who twice had captured him and the other who once had freed him. He could not possibly have made any mistake in identity. Why, then, had Rackowe been forcefully removed from the ranch, prodded over mountain trails, immured in cliff prison?

"Scary hope them 'Paches been good to Don Cling Ivy? You like this place, also my cliff *casa?*" The inquiries came from the "stick-up" man after he had waved Jack away and motioned Rackowe to a seat upon a block of stone.

"They're petty thieves," grumbled Cecil Joseph Rackowe, "but I must admit they didn't manhandle me. Scary, don't you think you've got an awful crust to steal an American citizen from out the

U. S. A. and carry him into a foreign country against his will?"

Gonzales laughed with easy good nature, as though he understood and appreciated the joke fully. "You make the grand meestake, gringo. For the first you ask, we have not steal any hombre from anywheres. For the secon', those sleep platform hang over my Mexico republic. You going to say, Scary think, 'I ver'-glad-I-have-come' before you go back." His tone had sharpened into semblance of a threat.

"If you didn't steal me, what do you call it?" demanded the prisoner.

"Joke—one darn' fine leetle joke. At heem we all goin' to laugh out of one side of our mouth or maybe, the other. Scary like to take some of hees laugh now, because of the sorrow of that Angel cat that you have to go leave her."

Rackowe's fists clenched as the Mexican's raucous peals were echoed back at them by cañon walls. But he reminded himself that he still was an innocuous minority; that opportunity had not yet beckoned him to act.

"You have seen her—Miss Colville?" he asked.

"I been feed pie by her. For that Scary too kind to tell her that she two times the cause of thees little joke that we have play on Cling Ivy."

Instead of untying the tangle, it seemed to be growing more intricate. With his mistaken-identity-ransom surmise apparently proved wrong, Rackowe scarcely knew where to start undoing the knotted problem of his plight. If the greaser would answer a certain question, it might help. Rackowe asked it, and in almost the same words he had used before:

"Mind telling me, Scary, just whose bandit you are?"

Gonzales considered a moment, then evidently decided that he did not mind, to judge by the careless shrug of shoulders which preceded his information.

"One time Scary bandit for Señor Lamber'; 'nother time for Don Crozier; 'nother time again for Don Regal Frosby." After a pause to relight his cigarette, he inquired, a twinkle in his nondescript eyes: "Maybe some other time Scary goin' be bandit for you, Señor Ivy? No?"

Under less stressful circumstances, the rogue's effrontery might have seemed refreshing. There was no doubt about his willingness to serve any master or that "Double Cross" should have been his middle name. Rackowe made mental note of this conclusion, one that might be of service if he found no other way out of his present predicament. But

first he must learn, if possible, the exact reason for the situation in which he found himself, and it seemed advisable to press the outlaw while he was in this particularly amiable humor.

"How comes Miss Angelica to be two times the cause of this joke on me?" Rackowe asked, grinning back the while, as though beginning to get into the spirit of the game. "Give it to me one barrel at a time."

Scary seemed to like the idea. "Just same as shoot from shotgun? Missy señorita look ver' good to gringo eyes. Two like to make her hees wife. She no can decide if same two stick all around same time—savvy?"

"You mean that Frosby hired you to pack me off into the mountains so that he could sail in and win the most desirable——"

The bandit interrupted this outburst with another lungful of laughs. "Good! Señor Cling Ivy like ver' much to cling around Mees Angel Cat. Scary's good frien' at Open Shut Rancho says he mus' not be allow'."

Rackowe registered the score to be paid and asked the contents of the second barrel.

"She ver' foolish, missy señorita. She like to put Scary in *carcel* for jus' one small meestake at the

Mesquite Hotel. She cannot know that he bandit sometime for that oncle, V. V., and almost for Don Crozier; also that he no like to seet inside gringo jail. That why I quite willing when Señor Regal ask me that you visit a while out here in my *casa grande!*"

"But how did you know I meant to sleep in the tree the other night?" asked the Easterner, anxious to dispose of another puzzle while the disposing was good.

"That Crozier Roberto, he do not love you also, señor. He ride automobile over to Open Shut and tell Don Regal about that you swap those bunk."

Rackowe set his teeth. The man was an out-and-out scoundrel, then, as the Philadelphian had suspected. And Crozier must have felt safe about Zena or he never would have interfered in the perhaps too obvious interest which his one-time rival had been showing toward the ranch girl. The Gothamite's hate must have been deeper than Rackowe had supposed.

Well, there was one pair of dark eyes which by this time, he hoped, would have seen the truth. Some way he felt more than ever sure of Angelica; that she would have set Zena straight about Crozier and even then was doing what lay within the power of

one girl to follow and find him. But in order to disprove himself that which he had been branded, he'd have to extricate himself before she arrived. While alert for some suggestion of where his avenue of escape would lie, Rackowe leisurely inquired how long this joke visit of his was expected to last.

"Onteel the scratchy Angel have make up her mind that she pull in those claw and fly to the Open Shut; or at least onteel she have agree——"

An angry shout, a rush of feet, imprecations hurled in guttural voices, the thud of blows—in quick succession from across the cliff plaza, interrupted them.

"Those 'Paches, they make fight again!" muttered Gonzales as he scrambled to his feet and started for the disturbance.

As if toward that avenue in the general direction of which escape might lie, the prisoner sprang up and followed.

By the time they reached the scene, the two Indians, hitherto so fraternal in their intercourse, were locked in tigerish embrace, snarling and pummeling as they rolled over the rock floor. Near by, back down, bristles waving, could be seen the stolen military brush in which Brother seemed to take such joy. That Jack in turn had appropriated it, been caught in the act, and attacked for his treachery of Red to

Red seemed a reasonable supposition. Probably after the first exchange of blows the brush had been succeeded as an impelling motive by their inborn lust to fight. At any rate, the pair gave a pulse-stirring exhibition of rough and tumble, with no attention to spare for their employer's excited demands that they behave.

Not once did they stand up to the fighting as white men would do. Each used one arm in a clinch, striking in hit-or-miss fashion with the other. Twice they gyrated perilously near the brink. A third time they neared the edge just as the Indian woman rushed from one of the caves with a shrilly screamed promise of knife-wielding support for her liege lord. From this new danger the brother tried to break away, but miscalculated his direction. Finding himself too near the brink to recover, he seemed to decide in the very act of going over to drag Jack with him.

Fortunately for both battlers, chance guided their fall just over the balcony and into the cave that had served Rackowe as an overnight prison. There they lay, still clinched, either stunned or killed by the fall.

Gonzales, peering over the edge, gave the woman an order in rapid-fire Spanish. She flung her knife to the rocks and scrambled down the ladder, evidently

to learn the worst or best. In his excitement over the fate of his aids, the boss bandit appeared to have forgotten their prisoner. Rackowe, watching him closely, recognized opportunity.

His first impulse was to strike from behind, topple the Mexican over the cliff, and let him take chance of landing upon something less vulnerable than his head. But that horror of killing, born in him from his long line of Quaker ancestors and afterward strengthened by his own experience into a dominant trait, conquered and restrained him.

Reaching out he seized the collar of the Mexican whom twice before he had held in his power and jerked him back from the brink. The next second his other hand had snatched the bandit's revolver from its holster and covered him. In half a minute the tables, thanks to a contested military brush, had been completed turned. Because of Barbed Barranca experience the gun was held on its target so steadily that the owner dared not contest its possession.

"The last laugh is the best, Scary," he asserted. "If you don't mind I'll take mine now."

While indulging chucklingly in his victory, Rackowe stretched the toe of one shoe toward the knife dropped by the squaw and sent it spinning into the

gorge. Not for a second, however, did he take his eyes from the turn-about prisoner.

"Suppose you draw up that ladder," was the Easterner's first order. "We'll leave the Jack family to meditate over the folly of placing too great importance upon the masculine toilet."

A wail rose from the woman with the lifting of the exit. At his new captor's request, Gonzales peered over, to report that the three below were sitting on the rock floor of the balcony, the woman wringing her hands.

"A close brush over the hairbrush," commented Rackowe cheerfully. "Oh, don't bother translating that to them. It's good, but you'd not interpret it right. Tell them in lingo which they can understand that you're going to lower water and grub to them—ample to last until you can ride back from the border with a posse." The last he accented with full enjoyment of his already planned campaign. "And you might add, if you don't feel too hoarse, that their banditing days are over, as are your own."

Just what Scary really said to his tools, Rackowe, of course, had no way of knowing. But he did make sure that they were sufficiently supplied with food and water for the week which probably would elapse before he could reach Arizomex and send back for

them. He meant that the little matter should not be made official and therefore ineffective, since the border folks doubtless would be quite willing to settle the matter out of hand. Of course, if anything happened to him on the way back—well, that would be the worse for the three Apaches, a fortune of war of their own waging. He could not be expected to handle more than one alien on such a trip as was before him.

In order to do full justice to the greener and his coup, it must be understood that not once, in all the excitement of the fight, the capture and his very natural desire to make good his own escape, had Rackowe forgotten the invisible musician who had played and sung him into thoughts of home at the last sundown.

Gonzales, sternly taxed with having another white prisoner, admitted the fact and led the way to a second ladder farther along the cliff. This he lowered to another private prison. From below, as though accustomed to the occasional semifreedom of the plaza, a man scrambled—a man whose skin was as white as his hair and beard.

CHAPTER XXIII

THE RIGHT MAN

INTO the life of every man come epochal events—moments and deeds that he never forgets; the sort that leave character marks for better or worse and for life. In that of Cecil Joseph Rackowe a foremost place should be given the forced march which he made across the northern Mexico plateau from the Cliff Casa lair of Scary Gonzales' small but pernicious band of renegades.

Indelibly burned into Rackowe's memory was his escape over the natural bridge, driving the Mexican before him and followed by an incoherently babbling white man whose mind was so disturbed that he seemed to care only for the battered violin carried under his arm.

The roping and saddling of the horses in the camouflaged pasture, performed by Scary under rifle point; the forcing of him to pick the correct trail toward the border, without being certain that he really was guiding them aright; the hog tying of

him with inexperienced fingers at their night camps, that they might get some rest; the eternal vigilance of the countless miles of up and down trail—all these contributed to memories never to be forgotten. Since his fellow white—evidently the relic of some previous raid whose ransom had miscarried—did not seem mentally dependable, all had fallen on Rackowe.

Vast was the Philadelphian's relief when recognized landmarks proved that their guide under duress had not dared prove false; perhaps not knowing how much of the geography of the out trip the Easterner remembered. More welcome than any previous trail's end of his life was their weary pull-in at Arizomex Ranch, from which he had been removed so unceremoniously some five days before.

However, no proper welcome of the prodigal awaited him. Indeed, on first inspection, the ranch house seemed deserted by all except old Barbara. From the old cook Rackowe learned that the Barnetts still were "visitin'," just gone for a little exercise stroll. He took advantage of their absence to dispose of his prisoner, lately turned penitent, and the refugee whose release he had effected with his own. For this purpose he deemed most suitable the room which he had given over to Crozier.

Yet was it misfortune—this whole experience?

Rackowe put the query to himself as he reëntered the living room and threw his weary bones into a Morris chair. If it had made more of a man of him—and he was self-respecting enough to hope that job could now be called completed—it was anything but misfortune.

If it had served to return a wreck of a prisoner to liberty and loved ones, as he still hoped to do for the old violinist who could sing English words so correctly, but could not carry through a spoken sentence, the ordeal, indeed, had been well worth while. If it only brought a small band of renegades to book —well, he'd not regret it.

With Rackowe's decision to recover from the shock of the murder of his father and live for the hopeful future rather than the tragic past, he had put all futile regret behind him. And suppose it brought a certain little ranch girl to realize that her heart beat to the tune of his, why being rustled by Scary and his Indians was the luckiest thing that possibly could have occurred to one so far from home.

Mrs. Barnett and Zena, on their return a few minutes later, were utterly and happily surprised to find Rackowe sound asleep in the lounging chair, a smile of anticipation on his face. When he awakened, they asked him no details—that he had returned

safely was enough for the overfull moment, and there was other news for which they both felt he should not be kept waiting.

"Where's Angelica, Lambert and all the rest?" Rackowe questioned eagerly.

Zena answered by asking him a question, the expression on her face half humorous, half serious. "Where do you suppose Angelica would be except looking for you? And where do you suppose Lambert and all the rest would be but following her and obeying orders. She seemed to have a hunch you'd come home; she left us to guard the base, I think she called this ranch.

"She's simply been marvelous, that girl," the mother contributed. "Nothing seemed to get done at all until she took hold. Somehow she reduced that big, overbearing doctor of mine to machinelike obedience. She got him and all the other able-bodied men within miles to meet her three mornings ago and organized them into a—what was the name of the organization, Zena?"

"A posse, Leonora. Besides her uncle, Robert, and Mr. Frosby, she collected cowboys, ranchmen and vaqueros, who for this or that reason are devoted to her. She seemed nearly beside herself, Cecil, when forced just at first to be inactive. But she

was as cool and commanding as any general once she was into the saddle. For three days and a good part of three nights she's been out at the head of a searching party, scouring the country in sections—looking for you."

The girl paused, then leaned to level straight into the eyes of her friend a beautiful look. "Cecil Joseph Rackowe," she said, "if you don't live to appreciate that angel child's devotion to that——"

"I have lived to do just that," he interrupted. "I appreciate it with every breath I draw. I tell you this, Zena, because——"

"Because you owe it to her and to me, friend. I am so very glad. I shall be happy enough seeing my two friends happy, until that time when the real right man for me happens along."

"Then Crozier——"

"Is too wrong, Cecil—entirely too wrong for me."

Rackowe pressed her two hands affectionately in his, then got unsteadily to his feet. "I'm relieved that you've discovered that fact for yourself, Zena."

"And I, too!" Mrs. Barnett inserted, quite as though she hadn't for a moment been in favor of the rich New Yorker.

Not even with a look did Rackowe remind her. "It will take a right real man to be the real right

one for your daughter," was his spoken offering. "Among us who love her, we'll find him, never fear. But I feel now that I should go out and find some one else. I can't sit here in safety, with her out combing the bush for me—the Angel. Surely there's a fresh horse about. As soon as I find her——"

Both fond women laid hold of him in protest. Rackowe must do nothing of the sort, they argued. He looked exhausted, and he might delay the general reunion by a random start in the wrong direction. A messenger had come in from the party at noon, saying that if the day's search brought no developments they would spend the night at Arizomex in order to start out next morning with a change of horses. They might ride in at any minute.

Rackowe, however, was intolerant of the inactive part assigned him. He wouldn't go at random, having an idea that it must have been the posse's dust which had given him a start that morning—had, in fact, sent him to cover in fear that they might prove Mexican friends of Gonzales'. He'd know where to seek the trail.

Fortunately—for the Barnetts' continued insistence—the issue was decided by the noise of hoofs beating the yard.

Zena, rushing to the window, shouted joyously:

"They're back—just as I predicted. Oh, what a surprise is in store for them—for her!"

But Zena had told no news to Rackowe. Already he was at the doorway; had started down the steps. He stopped short and stepped to one side, however, on seeing that Angelica clung to the arm of Regal Frosby as she came up the walk; that she appeared not to notice him and gave not a nod in return to the greeting of the Barnetts. He followed her into the big room in time to see her stumble and nearly fall. Except for the neighboring ranchman's support she would have collapsed.

In a rush of repentance he grasped what was wrong. She was played out—her strength utterly spent. She had come home bankrupt in hope and courage. Poor, pale, tattered, torn little ranch waif! Thank Heaven he had not needed her to find him; that he had found himself for her!

Crowding the others away, Rackowe caught her up in his arms and carried her to the divan; on his knees beside her he murmured the gladsome news that she was not dreaming, that he was here, that all was well.

"Safe—sound?" she murmured, running her brown, small hand through his blond hair.

"You've said it—both ways—darling!"

"Well, I'll be——" That was as far as Regal Frosby got with his expression of disgust.

As Rackowe gained his feet, the ranchman was turning to the door, but he sensed trouble and returned to meet it, for whatever else the owner of Open Shut may have been he was not a coward.

"Wouldn't go just yet, Frosby, if I were you," the Easterner challenged. "Gonzales has confessed that you hired him to rustle me, and I'll have to take you into Mesquite Wells."

Evidently this was more than Frosby had bargained for. Quick as an asp the ranchman's hand left the knob of the door. As he whirled, his hand clutched without noticeable pause his trusted revolver butt. Although he fired from the hip, the Barbed Barranca pupil this time was not caught trembling.

The reports of their two guns sounded as one, but the Easterner's must have been a split second ahead. It surely was, for his bullet dug through the gun fighter's fingers and into his wrist in time to spoil the famed Frosby aim, for once disgraced by a "marker" through the wood of the floor. There sounded the shriek of only two women. Angelica, who had use for her breath, was holding it.

When Lambert rushed into the room followed by several of his vaqueros and a couple of the neighbor-

ing ranchers, Frosby stood holding his injured right, gazing down at the ruin of it with an expression of utter despair. To a fighting man of the great Southwest, where they fight to-day nearly as much as they did in the Texas of yesterday, the loss of a shooting hand is a loss indeed.

"Nip yourself, man alive?" cried Lambert, to whose ears the simultaneous shots had carried as one.

With a nod, Frosby directed the veteran's glance across the room toward his missing guest.

"You, Clinging Ivy? You're back?" gasped Lambert.

"Yes, I'm back," drawled Rackowe with that characteristic mildness which just had proved itself dangerous. "I brought Gonzales with me—Scary and some one else. One second and I'll bring them in."

So used was he to being in command that he did not glance about for permission, but left the assorted group staring at each other. Zena and her mother crossed to Angelica and the three sat huddled on the couch until his return.

He was accompanied by one of those he had promised to bring in—a man perhaps more broken by hardship than by years, bent of form, white of hair and beard, vacant of expression. Under one arm he

carried, as though loath to lay them down, a bow and weather-beaten violin.

In the door this unexpected visitor paused and stared about him, as if alarmed at the sudden array of humans. And those who composed the array stared back. Who might this person be, presented so silently? From where? Why here?

For the moment the refugee's gaze roved from face to face, resting longest, perhaps, on those of the two young women; ended and settled upon the reddening visage that showed above Lambert's mask. Slowly the hand that held the bow was raised. The back of it brushed across the stranger's eyes vacant no longer—fast filling with acute misery.

The thin-clad figure shook for a moment, then, all at once, went tense. With a gurgling cry, strange from man or beast, he sprang toward Lambert, his hand reaching convulsively for the throat beneath the masking beard.

CHAPTER XXIV

WHILE THE MOON SHONE

AT no time in their past had Frank Colville been a physical match for his brother-in-law, and the long term spent as Gonzales' prisoner in the cliff dwelling had not strengthened him. Yet at this moment of confronting one another their natural position seemed reversed.

Big as he was, Lambert cowered back against the wall, trembling with an ague worse than ever had attacked Rackowe in the days before his remaking. It seemed that the grievously wronged owner of Arizomex was about to inflict such punishment as he deemed his toll.

And that might have been Whitebush's very life had not Rackowe been holding himself ready for just such a development. Having kept close to the man he had released, he now seized and held him from behind.

"Never mind, Colville, he can't get away—he'll be right here when you want him," Rackowe said soothingly. "Think a moment—isn't there some one

else to whom you owe your first attention? Don't you remember——"

"Angelica—my child—my motherless baby," the stranger interrupted brokenly and peered about the room.

The ranch girl who had risen tremblingly, leaned against Zena Barnett, as though too weak for her own support. He who was her father forgot the attack precipitated by the sudden return of his memory at sight of his enemy's face. Slowly, now, he crossed the room toward the two young women.

For a second he gazed into the face of the beautiful Easterner, then shook his white head. Angelica made no sign. More than anything she ever had wanted before, she wanted him with his own fatherly instinct to recognize her, grown up in his absence.

And although he had passed her by before the shock of the recent meeting with Lambert, Colville's eyes widened to the pitying hope in hers; his sad-set lips lifted in a smile of joy; his brain chain, snapped in twain so long ago, seemed relinked at this sight of her.

"Your mother's look—you never could outgrow that," he murmured as he took her in his arms. "I'd know you, my little half orphan, anywhere."

Regal Frosby, with a leer, turned toward his pard-

ner in affairs that were dark. "Looks as if I'd have company when Clinging Ivy takes his choice collection into the Wells," Frosby observed. "Murder will out, specially when you leave pilgrims to monkey with the deck."

Rackowe strode across to them. Then, with neatness and dispatch that took him most concerned entirely by surprise, he lifted old Lambert's gun. Through practice he was becoming something of an expert at this particular trick. "The sheriff's going to want you, Lambert, for conspiracy, attempted murder, forgery, and a few other small crimes," the Easterner said. "If you don't mind, just stick around a while."

"We'll see that he sticks whether he minds or no!" This assurance of assistance came from one of the ranchmen who had been a volunteer in Angelica's posse.

Another ranchman who also had joined the searching party said: "We cowmen hereabouts never was satisfied nohow with Lambert's poker-play explaining of the disappearance of Frank Colville. It sounded particularly crooked when we heard he'd won all the ranch away from Miss Angy here."

"You say you've got Gonzales?" asked the first of the neighbor whites.

"I've got him, all right, and I've got him trained." Rackowe turned and called. "Hi, there, Scary, I want you."

Indeed none ever had seen the bandit in the tractable mood that issued with him from the bedroom. Even that first day in Mesquite Wells when Lambert had pulled his tribute bluff, the scarred one had not been more tractable.

Since that morning he had been imagining the feel of the rope about his neck; had been tamed more by his own conscience than by any threat of his captor.

"We'll take charge of this choice bunch," said the second ranchman, for whom Angelica attested with a nod. "That the family reunion may not be interrupted by no black ghosts, we'll just take 'em out to the bunk shack."

"Keep Scary away from the two others," warned Rackowe, knowing how prone the bandit was to change masters.

"Don't you worry, greener what ain't so green," the first ranchman asserted. "He's goin' to be too all-fired busy making other confessions to get together with these here birds what have been hirin' him. Leave 'im to us, neighbor."

They had called him "neighbor!" Although his time on the rim of the range might be numbered by

days, already he knew the meaning of that. He hoped that Angelica heard.

Robert Crozier seemed relieved when Rackowe gave no signal that he was to be taken with the others. Evidently he had expected that some charge would be made against him. Rackowe's explanation, when all, by common consent, had moved toward the window in order to give father and daughter a moment alone, was more for Zena's benefit, although addressed straight at the culprit.

"I know you haven't played fair with any of us, Crozier," the Philadelphian declared. "Gonzales admits that you hired him the day you followed him into the *cholo* quarter of Mesquite Wells. He was to put me out of the running in some such way as he just failed to do for another boss. I suppose your reason for never giving the actual order was because you realized, fortunately for you and maybe for me, that Angelica absorbed my interest from first sight."

"Don't you go too far, you——" Crozier interrupted angrily. But he did not reach his epithet.

"He can't go too far to suit me," inserted Zena with spirit.

Rackowe smiled at her, but held back a fist that had clenched, probably out of respect for that Quaker strain which was so much a part of him.

"At any rate," he continued, "you never did give the order. You did, however, ride over to Frosby's and take advantage of his resentment by telling him I was sleeping in the tree that night. But I doubt if there's evidence enough to have you held for an Arizona jury and—well, Zena would like to see the last of you as quickly as possible, and suppose we let her pronounce the rest of your sentence."

The girl glanced up casually at him she had taken so long to learn. "My sentence is one word—good-by," she said.

"You don't mean that you wouldn't give a man a chance to redeem himself, even if he has gone to some lengths in a fair way of winning your love——"

"Exactly," Zena clipped off Crozier's plea. "I'd not wish to marry a second-chance man!"

"But you still have need of me—at least your dear mother has. Think of the discomforts she'll suffer without a man to manage your trip East!"

Mrs. Barnett entered her own denial of dependency. "We're not going back for so long that you might find it tiresome, if not actually dangerous, waiting. I shouldn't think of leaving at present; not until after the wonderful hot spring and the air and the exercise have completed the cure so well begun."

"I guess we all understand each other," the Phila-

delphian said. "You have your rented car, Crozier, and my advice to you is that you drive right on through Mesquite to Douglas to-night and find yourself on to-morrow morning's early train. The district attorney just might have some embarrassing questions to ask you when we bring in our prisoners to-morrow."

And Crozier, reading "The End," closed the book; that is to say, he packed and closed his traveling bags.

"Come here, folks," called Angelica from the big chair in which she had installed her miraculously returned father. "Dad is in a fair way to tell about what has happened to him all these years and I want you all, especially Cecil Joe, who found him, to hear. So far, we haven't said a thing, except how glad we are to get each other back. You believe, dad darling, that I am glad, don't you—terribly, really glad?"

As her friends gathered around and Angelica made clear to him their separate identities, the recent wreck of a man visibly began to get a better grip on himself.

"Suppose you start with that poker game in which you and Lambert staked the ranch," Rackowe offered by way of suggestion.

This proved a false lead. Colville knew nothing

about any poker game; he didn't gamble, he said. He was surprised that Lambert hadn't invented a more likely story to account for his disappearance.

"Victor Lambert's enmity," he began, "dates back to our cow-punching days in Montana. It seemed aggravated, rather than overcome, when I fell in love with and married his only sister, Angelica's mother and the only woman to me in the world. Having fallen upon evil days, Lambert, nevertheless, drifted down here to Arizomex and planted himself upon me.

"For his sister's sake," Colville went on, "I endured him and even tried to stake him to a ranch hold. But he took no interest in anything except more or less worthless mining chances across the border. One night he came in declaring that he had stumbled upon a bonanza, that if I'd just invest a few thousand for development, he'd make us both rich. I started out with him before daybreak, expecting to be back that night." At this point Colville's account slumped while he stared fixedly at his daughter, as if absorbed in an effort to measure time beyond his powers.

"You've grown such a lot, little girl," he complained. "Has it been weeks I've been away—or months—or——"

"Ten years, dad—ten endless ones."

"To think—just to think of missing the joy of watching you and knowing you those years of your childhood," Colville said, barely restraining his emotions. "I'll never be able to forgive——"

"But I'm still only a child—you'll have heaps of time to watch me grow," Angelica consoled him.

"And you won't have to forgive or to punish your old scoundrel of a relative," Rackowe seconded. "Just tell us the rest that happened. The courts will take care of Lambert."

As a matter of fact, Rackowe was anxious to check up on the truthfulness of Scary Gonzales, although that double-crossing Mexican had seemed to speak sincerely after his breakdown that morning.

The brothers-in-law, Colville went on to explain, had reached the prospect about noon, finding it near the hut of the Mexican who even at that time had acquired an unsavory reputation. Its ore lead had not looked good to Colville, more experienced with the mineral of the region.

He had told Lambert that any effort to develop it would be only a waste of time and money. Thereupon Colville's brother-in-law had demanded a half interest in Arizomex Ranch and, on being indignantly refused, had worked himself into a violent

rage. Colville remembered being struck down by a gun butt—then nothing more for days.

"When I was able to be moved," Colville said, "I thought my keepers—Gonzales and his two Apaches —were taking me home by slow stages, but each day the country grew stranger. At last we pulled up at the cliff dwellings, where in time it dawned on me that they did not mean to let me go. Why they did not kill me and be done with it, I could not understand, but——"

"Scary made that plain," interrupted Rackowe. "So long as you lived you were a source of revenue to him. Lambert did not know exactly where you had been taken, but he kept on paying for your board. The Mexican even made the old scoundrel produce your violin after your mind got sort of hazy and you would cry out for it. And it is thanks to the instrument and your skill with it that I knew I had a fellow prisoner. Why didn't you answer me, sir, when I sang with you and called out to you?"

"Voices—cañon voices—I'd answered so many of 'em I was plumb tired. What happened to the Indians?"

Rackowe explained that they were having their turn at a cliffside prison—that he meant to send a posse for them in the morning.

"Yes—yes, they liked the violin." Colville reached out to the table for it; held it close to him. "If it hadn't been for this old friend, I'd never have stood out the years. The Indians were kind enough to me; they fed me well, saw that I had exercise, but never once in all the years did they give me one chance to get away. Much of the time I must have been quite out of my head—those were the easy periods. But the lucid ones—when I remembered Angelica and how she probably was at the mercy of that fiend —those were insupportable."

They could see that excitement was growing upon him; that a continued revival of the heartaches of those lost years might prove disastrous. The daughter's insistence that he be stowed away in his own room for a good rest in bed appealed to all as judicious; at last it conquered his objection.

While Colville sipped a broth which old Barbara had prepared, the two girls from the master's preempted room removed all trace of the interloper. Soon the weak and weary refugee was reëstablished there under threat of the sternest, longest siege of nursing by which border patient ever was made completely blest.

Not until long after supper did Cecil Joseph Rackowe get a chance to ask whether the radiant

young mistress of the ranch felt any more than gratitude to him for his untying of her life knot. He felt it a good omen, however, that he didn't need to ask her for an interview—that of her own accord she followed him out into such light as the very new moon afforded.

"What will happen next?" she asked, sighing, after they had walked some paces in silence.

"Shall I show you?" Rackowe caught her hand and bent willingly enough.

"I mean," Angelica amplified, when she had the chance, "about dad and Arizomex Ranch and——"

"Oh, lots of things," Rackowe promised. "We'll have those forged papers thrown out, the title cleared, and the ranch legally restored to your father. I'm sure there are plenty of good laws in Arizona to rectify this particular kind of wrong."

She wasn't of the opinion, she told him, that righting the wrong would be as easy as he imagined. She detailed to him the various complications of the mortgaged stock; the sheaf of notes held by the Lariat National; the machinations of H. C. Livermore, the prime instigator of that "king-queen-and-jack" play against the Easterners, which included the plan to kidnap for ransom King Crozier, to capture by matrimony Queen Leonora Barnett, and to exchange the nearly worthless ranch for the investment

funds intrusted to Jack Rackowe. But being of cheerful habit of mind, Rackowe would have none of Angelica's pessimism.

"You class this ranch as nearly worthless, I presume, simply because the feed has gone short through seasons of repeated drought?" the Easterner asked, with the manner of one about to spring a surprise, to play the winning card.

Angelica nodded. "Your presumption does you credit, Cecil Joe. I doubt if the ranch is worth salvage under present conditions. If it was, Livermore would have grabbed it long since."

"Then you have overlooked the very most important thing which has prickled itself into my attention —the cacti," Rackowe said exultantly. "From examination and tests that I have made I find the plant rich in protein, fats, and carbohydrates—just what cattle in an arid land particularly need."

"And needles, young Back Easter—don't be forgetting the needles—which are just what cattle can't stand or they'd never have shown a rib this side the Chicago stockyards." Angelica smiled with a charm that was more than delightful.

"Never thought of barbering off the needles, did you, angel child?"

Had he gone suddenly silly over all to-day's relief? she asked him. Barbering cacti, indeed!

But never was Rackowe further from frivolity, as he soon convinced Angelica. "I mean to singe the spines from the cacti, Angel. To that end I've designed a gasoline burner, something on the order of a plumber's torch. With one of them I can clean a thousand pounds of cacti a day. With two—oh, well, there's no need of Arizomex cattle suffering for feed as long as the barrancas yield and beef on the hoof is worth more per pound than gasoline the gallon.

"You'll see when you watch the way the steers go at the pears without the prickles," Rackowe continued. "It was one of the ideas that brought me West and it promises to keep me here. From it I'm going to make money enough to give you everything that you ought to have, and——"

For a moment the Easterner paused; then he went on, his voice tense with restrained feeling: "Well, Angel, will you adopt a third name—try Rackowe in place of Lambert, or even of Colville? Won't you make your rim o' the range heaven for me? I've already shown you what was going to happen next."

Angelica glanced up at Rackowe from under her curls. Even by the light of the silver moon, she could see—and admitted as much by her thrilled silence—that never any more was there to be a question regarding her name.

THE END

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